

Junagadh State and its Lions: Conservation in Princely India, 1879–1947

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Abstract: *Conservation in Princely India, during the British period, was brought on by several causes and responses. The Junagadh State's efforts at conservation were arguably the earliest in the Indian Empire for protecting a species for its own sake. State control of hunting is an old Indian royal tradition, which Junagadh never gave up. However, princely hunting closely linked to reasons of state, had to nevertheless involve its opposite—a strategy for conservation in order to ensure the survival of those hunted. Junagadh state pioneered the 'counting' of large fauna in the sub-continent. The last Nawab laid claim to total ownership of lions, as does the state government of Gujarat today. This paper traces these and related developments leading up to the independence of India and briefly lays the historical foundation of present day conservation efforts.*

Keywords: Saurashtra, Gir, lions, Rasulkhanji, British administration, Curzon, Mahbatkhanji III

INTRODUCTION

If one were to look at many of the forests, grasslands and wetlands in India, which have become National Parks and Sanctuaries after independence, it becomes evident that they were the old hunting grounds of Indian princes, a fact

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which is often not appreciated. Some of the better known instances are Dachigam of Jammu & Kashmir, Keola Deo Ghana of Bharatpur, Ranthambhore and Sariska of Jaipur and Alwar respectively, and Bandhavgarh of Rewa. In the west is the Gir forest, which straddled Junagadh, Bhavnagar, Baroda and other states. In the south are Bandipur and Nagarhole of Mysore, Periyar of Travancore and in the east are Simlipal of Mayurbhanj and Kaibul Lamjao of Manipur. Indian princes are usually remembered for their outlandish lifestyle, but their contributions seldom receives serious appraisal. The case of Maharaja Ramanuj Saran Singh Deo of Surguja (r1917–1947) shooting more than a thousand tigers is quoted often, yet rarely does one find the efforts of princes to protect nature being seriously studied.

Asiatic lions once roamed from Palestine to Palamau, but they were wiped out barring stray sightings throughout their range except in the Gir forest and its environs at the dawn of the twentieth century. The forest had become a single site for an endangered species, with a recorded history of over a century of continued coexistence, with conflict of cattle and carnivore, and depredations of *shikar*. In spite of several changes in administration—princely state to British administration to independence and beyond—it has a remarkable continuity of policy of protection of the lion and its habitat. It is a clear illustration that history is crucial to understand the present and to plan for the future.

Saurashtra Peninsula and Junagadh State

The Saurashtra peninsula itself is a unique geographical landscape. It is bound by the Gulf of Kutch in the north, in the south and the west by the Arabian Sea and towards the east by the Gulf of Khambatt (Cambay). Unlike other peninsulas, it is almost separated from the mainland of India by the Little Run of Kutch and the flat sedimentary lowlands of Nal and the Bhal. M.A. Wynter-Blyth, Principal of Rajkumar College (1948–1963), the former princes' college at Rajkot and a renowned geographer and expert on Gir and its lions, was of the view that it was nearly insular up to the seventeenth century (Wynter-Blyth c1961:2). The people inhabiting it speak Gujarati which has a distinct dialect, and the Kathiawadi way of life is noticeably different from the rest of Gujarat even to-day. The peninsula was always a far off place for any imperial power at Delhi. It is therefore not surprising that it was almost entirely ruled by some 222 principalities, large and small, covering nearly its whole area with but a small British Indian presence at Rajkot and elsewhere. Among the states, Junagadh had the pride of place covering an area of 8639 km² with a population of 800,000 and a 15 gun salute for its Nawab (Low 1947:1342; Menon 1956:150). It considered itself successor to the Mughal Empire from the demise of which it had arisen and the Nawabs received *zortalbi*, (tribute), from many states of the peninsula. The very isolation of this area also ensured that the lion managed to survive here, whereas

the political turmoils and its relentless pursuit in the nineteenth century ensured its destruction elsewhere in India.

Junagadh State or ‘*Soruth Sarkar*’ as it styled itself since it covered the Soruth region, was ruled by the Nawabs of the Babi clan believed to be descendants of one Abdul Rashid, who it was claimed, was in the service of the Prophet Mohamad. However, it was Sher Khan Babi who threw out the Mughal governor of the region around 1735 and founded the State and the dynasty which saw the rule of nine Nawabs until 1947 when the state itself disappeared in the cauldron of the Dominion of India. The reigns of the eighth and the ninth Nawabs with the British administration which divided the two and the State of Saurashtra which followed, in other words roughly the first half of the twentieth century, are the focus of this chapter since this period saw the lion being saved from almost certain annihilation.

Imperatives of Protection

The setting for these events, was the second half of the nineteenth century which saw an unprecedented opening up of the subcontinent. In 1852 the telegraph made its appearance. In the subsequent year, the first train steamed out of Bori Bundar (now Chatrapati Shivaji Terminus) Mumbai for Thane. And by the 1870s a government official was deputed to supply 200,000 logs for the Indian Peninsular Railways from Betul alone in the Central Provinces (Rangarajan 1996:56). ‘Venomous Snakes and Dangerous Beasts’ were being exterminated to facilitate expansion of imperial control and to protect the populace. It is estimated that between 1875 and 1925 80,000 tigers, 150, 000 leopards and 200,000 wolves were destroyed for rewards whereas many more may have perished for which no claims may have been made (Rangarajan 2001b: 32). In Saurashtra, the semi-arid areas, ‘*vidis*’ or grasslands, were either common grazing grounds of villages which then had far less grazing pressures, or where the preserves of one or the other of the several princes. Its forests too such as those of Barda, Alech, Mitiala or Gir were part of one state or the other. But the peninsula was different. It did not face the pressures of timber extraction as well as the case of the jungles in the Central Provinces, as it simply did not have that quality of teak trees and the British Indian Territory being minuscule, eradication of ‘harmful’ creatures was not as systematic or extensive though 16 lions were killed for bounties by the princes of Saurashtra in three years around 1870s (Rangarajan 2001a). The major onslaught on wild animals was from slow but certain expansion of agriculture and grazing needs, apart from the depredations of poachers and princely *shikar*. The peninsula faced three years of famine from 1877 but it appears that the Sorath region where most lions lived was not much affected. However the famine of 1899–1900 was so severe that Junagadh State had to set up 157 relief works in its territory (Srivastava and Srivastava 1996). More than a hundred years later it is still remembered as the terrible ‘*Chappanyo Kal*’, the word ‘*Chappan*’

means fifty-six in Gujarati and the reference was to the Vikram Samvat year 1956 in which the blight came.

Lions themselves were disappearing from elsewhere in the peninsula as recorded by Lt. Col. L.L. Fenton who states that apart from the Gir, they had been wiped out by the middle of the nineteenth century from Barda and Alech hills, Chotila and Dhrangadhra. However, there was a stray record in 1884 from Navanagar (Fenton c1924: 1-2). Thus the stage was set for the battle for the lion's survival only in and around Gir which straddled three large states of Junagadh, Bhavnagar and Baroda. Smaller principalities such as Bilkha, Jetpur, Mendarda and others were also to play a key role in the outcome. The situation was such that even if the Imperial government wanted a lion specimen for a zoo or a museum, they had to request Junagadh State. Col. W.W. Anderson, Political Agent to the Governor of Bombay Presidency stationed at Rajkot, made a request to Junagadh in 1867 to procure a live lion, a skin or a skeleton. The chief *Diwan* (Chief Minister) Gokulji Sampatji Jhala, had to notify the request in the State Gazette offering rewards varying from Rs 150 to Rs 25 for a live lion to a complete skin (DUSJ. Vol. 13, no. 9, April 1868), a large sum of money at the time. The Gir itself had become a haven for outlaws earlier and was malaria country making it *terra incognita* for most outsiders. It is obvious that the state did not yet have the machinery to trap lions on its own.

The First Attempt at the Protection of Lions

The first salvo for the protection of lions was fired by the sixth Nawab Maubatkhani II (1851–1888) in 1879 (GA File No. nil, Political Agency Notification No. 22 of 10 May, 1879). A fact that emerges from the Junagadh state records and it pushes back the date for the earliest protection given to wildlife noted by scholars working from imperial records by more than two decades (Rangarajan 2001b). The state had been exercised for sometime about the lion's dwindling numbers which prompted the Nawab to order strict protection of lions in his domains. He was encouraged by Lord Sandhurst, Governor of Bombay to do so and the Nawab saw an opportunity to ask Col. L.C. Barton, Political Agent to issue a notification to secure the lion's protection outside the Gir forest, i.e. outside Junagadh State. The notification which was issued the next year, noted that the Nawab had already issued an 'interdict' against the destruction of lions, the Governor 'fears that this race of free nature [i.e. lions] may become extinct unless means are taken for their preservation ...' and it hoped that European Sportsmen would respect it (GA, file no. nil, notification no. 1683, resolution no. 1877). Subsequently, Junagadh promulgated a set of rules virtually banning all *shikar* and trapping of 'any kind of animal' in its territory without the specific permission of the State (DUSJ, vol. 13, no. 9, April 1880). Though the Madras Presidency had passed an act as early as 1870 to preserve elephants followed by an all India act in

1879 'to prevent indiscriminate destruction of elephants', these measures were taken to ensure their steady supply for military use and logging operations (Sukumar 2003: 78–79). The Nawab's action and the British notification are a first in so far as protection of a species for its own sake is concerned and that too, at a time when tigers, leopards, wolves and other animals were being destroyed in British India as varmint. Unfortunately, in spite of these noble intentions, the lions were pursued till the independence of India and beyond.

It is pertinent to analyse these enactments and restrictions. In India as elsewhere, the biggest carnivore such as the lion or tiger was traditionally considered royal game for centuries which could not be interfered with without the king's permission or at any rate, his sufferance (for details see Divyabhanusinh 2005). The advent of British rule in Saurashtra made it essential for the Nawab to give it the form of a written '*diktat*' in order to ensure that there was no doubt about the ownership of game animals and of royal prerogative. In fact the Junagadh State notification was a 'modern' manifestation of an ancient rite. The intent of the British Gazette notification makes it clear that it was directed towards 'Europeans' who could not go about shooting any animal, not only lions, without State permissions in Junagadh. Outside of the Gir and its environs, there were no lions left in any case by this time, save perhaps a rare itinerant. The Indians on the other hand knew their place unless they were brother princes.

Nawab Rasulkhanji's Rule

The rule of the seventh Nawab Bahadurkhanji III (1888–1892) did not see any major event in the protection of lions. He died childless and was succeeded by his brother Rasulkhanji (1892–1911) who had led the life of a '*fakir*' (religious mendicant) though he had married, spoke little English, was a crack shot who could take out a tossed coin with a gun, and though he had shot many leopards in his youth, he had not shot a lion, nor did he have the desire to shoot one. He was not trained in statecraft which he learnt on the job and he learnt it well (Divyabhanusinh 2005: ch. 8). He also had the knack of selecting able *diwans*, eight out of ten of whom were Hindus.

Though Junagadh State had taken formal steps for the lion's protection, the ground reality was different. According to the State's administration report, Junagadh had an area of 8505 km² in 1906–07 and somewhat less than half of it had been covered by the Gir forest when the Great Trigonometrical Survey was conducted in 1875–76. But the forest was dwindling in size and almost two-thirds of the jungle had denuded since then. Though a Mr Bar (the state's administration report gives no information about his antecedents) had prepared a plan for its protection as early as 1880 at the instance of the Political Agent, Col. L.C. Barton, it seems to have remained on paper (JAR 1906–07:1, 22–27).

Soon after he came to the throne, Rasulkhanji issued a new set of rules for *shikar* in 1896 which involved heavy fines for offenders. He promulgated a

total ban on killing peafowl. He anticipated our republic – which made it the national bird and banned its destruction – by more than half a century. The lions on the other hand, could only be shot by special permission of the state for special reasons and circumstances (JRM 1930, vol. 3, 1907–8, notification no. 1683, resolution no. 1877). Peacock being the chosen mount of Goddess Saraswati according to the Hindus, who numbered four out of five of Junagadh's subjects, was given protection. The Nawab's action was a clear indication of his respect for his subjects' sentiments. The lion however, was not so lucky though it is the chosen mount of Goddess Durga. In other words lions could be shot for *raisons d'état* or personal favours. By 1906–07 only 883 km² of Gir came under the jurisdiction of the recently created Forest Department to which 184 km² area was added. In the same year the French-trained F.R. Desai was appointed the first Conservator of Forests, who drew up a detailed proposal for the forest management which protected it from illegal felling yet it gave to the state a steady income which continued right up to 1945 (JAR, 1907, vol. 3, 1, 21–22; 1945:112). By 1908–09 the area of Gir forest under the charge of the Forest Department had increased to 1530 km² and a sanctuary for lions was set up covering an area of over 326 km² within it (JAR 1908–9, 32–33; 1909–10:31). It was the first of its kind in the British Indian empire to be followed a decade later by Kaziranga which was declared a Reserved Forest to protect the greater one horned rhinoceros in 1908. This was the culmination of the steps initiated under Lord Curzon's Viceroyalty (1899–1905) in 1905 when it was believed that hardly 10 to 12 animals were left in the area. It was declared a Game Sanctuary as late as 1926 (Gee, 1964:53; Oberoi and Bonal 2002:24). This is an account of the state's intent and formal declarations. How much of it was translated into action on the ground was a different matter. The state's annual administration report for the year 1911–12 by which time Junagadh had just come under British administration, states that F.R. Desai's recommendations were not acted upon and his report 'appears to have been filed in the *Diwan's* office' (JAR 1911–12:32). Whether this is an accurate reflection of reality or it was an attempt to show Rasulkhanji's administration in poor light upon which the British administration would improve, is moot.

An Asiatic lion trophy was a rarity and therefore there were continuous pressures on Junagadh state from British officers. A dubious example was set by Sir Seymour Fitzgerald, Governor of Bombay who went to the Gir in 1870 after inaugurating the Rajkumar College, at Rajkot, where he bagged five lions (Edwards and Fraser 1907:184; Bhavnagar 1911, vol. 1:385). Over a period of time the Governors of Bombay came to regard lion *shikar* as their '*hukk*' (right) lamented Sir Patrick Robert Cadell who was to become the *diwan* of Junagadh from 1932 to 1935. Viceroys too went to the Gir on *shikar*, the last one being the shoot of Lord Linlithgow in 1942. Such forays were a major drain on the state's resources, so much so that Cadell ruefully commented that 'the game [of protecting lions] sometimes seems hardly worth the candle' (Cadell 1933).

Even lesser British officers wanted lion trophies. The prevailing rules of Junagadh State required that they obtain permits from the Nawab's administration. These, noted Fenton, were liberally given to local British Officers and others in the last years of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century. He would later recall that 'at no time the preservation of the lions was strictly carried out' (Fenton c1924: 7) in spite of the stringent rules promulgated by three Nawabs in succession. Charles Augustus Kincaid, Judicial Assistant to the Political Agent in 1902, was permitted a lion by Rasulkhanji. He was very keen to shoot a male man-eater but ended up by shooting a lioness. He sent a telegram to the Nawab thanking him for his hospitality to his wife and him and for permitting him to shoot one lion against which he had shot a lioness. The Nawab replied 'Take lioness for Madam Saheb, get lion for yourself' (Kincaid 1935: 10–11).

Junagadh State had a unique problem of the lion. Its territories did not encompass all of the Gir jungle which spread across the borders of neighbouring princely states. In fact, the problem was serious enough for Rasulkhanji to address the highest officer in the Empire, Lord Curzon the Viceroy, in his letter of 8 August 1901. He said that lions had left their lairs in the forest and gone over to the plain country bordering the Gir into the other principalities' territories. While the lion was strictly protected in Junagadh such was not the case outside and if the animal did not receive strict protection there, he feared 'that this noble race will be extinguished by the hands of common people, unless the prohibition of destroying it is strictly enforced in all surrounding places [neighbouring states and smaller principalities] alike.' Actually, in a letter dated 19 June 1901, the *diwan* Chunilal Sarabhai Hazrat had taken up the same issue with Capt. R.S. Pottinger, Asst. Political Agent, Soruth Prant (GA, file no. 1, 1900–1921) which presumably had little effect and which provoked the Nawab's own interventions.

While the Junagadh administration controlled the *shikar* of lions, it could not always effectively confine the animals within its domains and in any case it had no control over the destruction of lions once they had left its boundaries. The imperial government had little control over the internal affairs of Indian states too, and the dilemma continued to dog the Junagadh State up to 1947 for the neighbouring princes saw 'Junagadh's lions' as 'fair game' if they strayed into their territory and often induced them to do so.

The Great Numbers Game and Lord Curzon

The declining number of lions was a cause for grave concern for Junagadh State stimulating early attempts to estimate just how many lions were left in the wild. The first such attempt was made by Major-General William Rice who had hunted lions there around the 1850s. According to him, there were less than 300 lions left in the Gir (Rice 1884:144). Thirty years later, the Kathiawar Gazetteer of 1884 stated that 'there were probably no more than

ten or a dozen lions left in the whole Gir forest' (Edwards and Fraser 1907: 172). This statement was obviously a gross exaggeration, for the same year saw Col. J.W. Watson's authoritative statistical account of Junagadh State which records lions 'as most famous of wild animals' of the region and describes them in some detail. The report does not state that they were about to be wiped out or they numbered barely a dozen (Watson 1884: 6-7). Junagadh soon took up the enumeration process itself and came up with a figure of 31 in 1893 (Rashid and David 1992:94). It is strange that Fenton who had experienced the *Chappanyo Kal* of 1899-1900 in Saurashtra does not mention any alarmist figures for lion population. He states simply that these animals were only to be found in the Gir by that time. There is no doubt that both the figures of 12 and 31 were quite inaccurate. In fact Edwards and Fraser, the authors of the 'authorised' account of Junagadh State, call the number of 12 lions very misleading. They go on to quote Major H.G. Carnegie Political Agent of Halar in 1905, who had estimated a population to be between 60 and 70 whereas the Junagadh administration believed that there were 'at least 100 lions' left at that time (Edwards and Fraser 1907: 172-73). It is pertinent to note that this was among the lowest estimated populations of a large vertebrate in the Empire. All these figures were little more than guesses, but the fact that they were made at all, is evidence of the concern over the increasing rarity of the species.

There was logic to the game of numbers. Though Junagadh routinely underplayed the size of lion population to keep British officers and ambitious princes from making their *shikar* a habit, there is no doubt that their numbers had declined a great deal. While it spurred Junagadh to give it protection it also stopped even a Viceroy from hunting them. In 1900 Lord Curzon was to visit the State. A viceregal visit to a native state was a great honour for the latter and no expense was spared to make it a success. In Junagadh, a lion shoot was *de rigueur* for the Viceroy just as say a tiger shoot in Gwalior or a good tusker in Mysore or a duck shoot in Bharatput was. Curzon had heard there were very few lions left. His source of information remains unclear to this day: it was certainly not his host, Junagadh State. There was, however, a newspaper report from Bombay which said that the lions' condition was precarious and that they should be allowed to remain free in their last retreat undisturbed by 'Viceroy or Vandal' (Mosse 1957). In the event, Curzon did not go to the Gir, he returned from Junagadh and urged the Nawab to give these animals strict protection. Rasulkhanji's disappointment at being unable to 'offer' a lion was evident in his letter to the viceroy. On 27 November, 1900 he wrote:

'I cannot but observe here that I fully appreciated and admired your noble consideration in abandoning the lion shooting. Your Excellency's giving up the idea has greatly disappointed me.'

The cry raised on this side of India that the lions were almost extinct in the Gir forest and the shooting would help in the final extermination of the animal was far from correct ...

I propose however to approach your Excellency later on with the request to favour me with a shooting excursion in the Gir before your Excellency's departure from India' (GA, file No. 49, 1901).

The implications of this letter are clear. The Nawab and his administration would provide protection, but the lion would be available for *raisons d'état*. It is also a clear indication that though they were few, lions were not about to become extinct.

The British Administration

Rasulkhanji died in 1911 leaving a minor heir-apparent to succeed him. The Imperial government took no chances and promptly imposed British administration in the State which lasted for a decade under the stewardship of H.D. Rendall till 1920 when the last Nawab Mahbatkhanji III came of age. This opened another chapter in the conservation of lions.

Lord Curzon himself had hoped that his example of restraint in not shooting a lion would be followed by others in the empire. He wrote to the Burma Game Preservation Association in 1902 that lions were only to be found in the ever narrow patch of forest in Kathiwawar and he was 'on the verge of contributing to their still further reduction ... but fortunately I found out my mistake in time, and was able to adopt a restraint which I hope that others will follow' (NAI, Home Public, August 1904, No. 15). Regrettably, this did not happen and the Junagadh State had to give into such requests during Rasulkhanji's reign. The British administration had no such problems. They could surely not be seen to be misusing their powers and bestowing favours by giving permission to British officers or other Europeans for such shoots during the minority of the Nawab. Cadell recorded with satisfaction that during this period between 1911 and 1920 'not even a Governor of Bombay ... was invited to shoot in the forest' (Cadell 1933).

Under the very same circumstances, the British administration was able to ward off requests from other princes who sought permissions to shoot, which was a constant irritant to Junagadh State. Kumar Shri Vijayrajji of Kutch approached L. Robertson, the administrator (who was holding charge in the absence of Rendall who was away on home leave), for permission. It was denied and he was told that two lions had already been promised to other sportsmen. Maharaja Jam Saheb Ranjitsinhji of Navanagar whose depredations were to exasperate Junagadh was curtly informed by Robertson 'that my jungle [Junagadh's Gir] will be quite enough shot by my own friends ...' and therefore he could not be given a permit. The Private Secretary of Maharaja Ganga Singh

of Bikaner was informed that the Maharaja's proposed visit in 1913 could not take place as W.A. Wallinger, Conservator of Forests, had reported that only 6 or 7 male lions were left in the Junagadh Gir. He was sure the Maharaja would take a 'sportsman's view and understand our position'. The Raja of Poonch a feudatory prince of Jammu & Kashmir, state was curtly informed that permissions for lion shoots were given only in exceptional circumstances and many persons were on the waiting list' (GA file no. 6, 1912, letters of 18 February, 22 March; file no. 17, 1913, letters of 16 Feb, 10 April; file no. 15, 1917, letter of 23 Feb.). After all Poonch was not in the same league as Bikaner!

H.D. Rendall was put on the spot by a request for an Indian lion from the British Museum which came through the office of the Secretary of State for India. It is to the credit of the administrator that he held his ground saying he had refused many requests from various ruling chiefs and if a permission was given in this case,

...*'We might ... be liable to misconstruction of an undesirable kind if we transgressed our own pact, even in the interest of science, and I am particularly anxious to avoid any such impression'* (GA file no. 15, 1914, letters of 3 Dec and 9 Dec.).

And that's where it rested.

This interregnum period between the penultimate and the last Nawabs saw an overall tightening of administration. The British administration reinforced earlier efforts for protection. The lions had never had it so good.

Nawab Mahabatkhanji III, the Last Nawab's Rule

The last Nawab, Mahabatkhanji III was invested with full powers in 1920 by the Imperial Government. He would prove to be a weak ruler. As early as 1911 the state's Administration Report blandly stated that the minor chief 'is somewhat backward, but under the care of his tutor and guardian Mr Turkhad he has advanced both in physical and mental attainments ...' (JAR, 1910-11:3). These were portents of events yet to take place. He inherited a tightly administered principality, but he took avuncular interest in managing the affairs of state which was run by his *diwans* and the state's executive council of which he was the head. His reign of twenty-seven years saw ten *diwans* of which four were Hindus, two were British officers and four were Muslims (Sodha 2002:20). All of whom served him and the state loyally but for two, the first being his childhood friend Mohmad Bhai, who had to leave under a cloud in 1932 which brought the British in again, and the last *diwan*, Shah Nawaz Bhutto, whose son Zulfikar and grand daughter Benazir were to become Prime Ministers of Pakistan. He influenced the Nawab to accede to Pakistan in 1947. The Nawab today is a political *persona non grata* in India

for his monumental act of political naivety. If he is remembered at all, it is for his love of dogs. His even-handed treatment of all his subjects regardless of religion, his love for the Kathi horse, a breed unique to the region which was put on a postage stamp (Divyabhanusinh 1992), and particularly for his Gir breed of cows, the favourite of which one Kaveri by name, accompanied him wherever he traveled in his state, his ban on cow slaughter of draft and milch cattle in 1944 (Sodha 2002:82; Divyabhanusinh 2005, ch. 9) are all forgotten. As for the lions, they remained a subject close to his heart till the very end. No one could have imagined it, but their survival is part of the legacy of the Babi dynasty which ruled Junagadh for nearly two centuries.

To Mahbatkhanji, lions were royal game, his special charge. He shot lions as was the custom of the times, yet he did so sparingly. He would go to Gir for *shikar*. The best trophy animal with the darkest mane would be earmarked for him, it would be beaten out of the jungle in front of his *machan* (shooting platform built usually on a tree) but the Nawab would not shoot saying that the animal's mane was not black enough! He would tell the *shikaris* that he would come the next Friday for another shoot and leave for Junagadh. The object was to keep an eye on what was happening in the jungle and keep his staff on their toes (Divyabhanusinh 2005, ch. 9).

Very few lions were shot by the Nawab or other personages of his state as the records of van Ingen and van Ingen the famous taxidermists of Mysore show. Between 1929–1932 and 1940–1947, i.e. in a period of twelve years, the firm received only fourteen skins for processing and not all of them may have been *shikar* trophies. The records for the rest of the years of the Nawab's reign are not available (E. Joebert van Ingen, pers. comm. 1997). Sir Patrick Cadell, records that the Nawab was a keen conservationist and had shot only one lion between 1920 and 1933 (Cadell 1933), a remarkable restraint by any standard of the time. One has only to note that Maharana Fateh Singh of Mewar (r. 1885–1930) shot over 500 tigers during his reign, whereas Maharaja Gulab Singh of Rewa (r. 1922–1946) shot about 900 in the early 1920s (Ranjitsinh 1997:22) to realise the importance of the Nawab's abstinence. It is a strange coincidence that the last two Nawabs were not keen *shikaris* though they lorded over arguably the most coveted trophy India could offer. What would have happened if they were keen hunters is moot. One can cite however, two contemporaries namely, Maharao Khengarji of Kutch (r. 1885–1942) and Maharawal Lakshman Singh of Dungarpur (r. 1928–1948). Both of them went to the extent of reintroducing large predators in their states—leopards and tigers respectively—in the 1920s which had become extinct. Both were keen *shikaris* and they reintroduced these animals for their hunting pleasures, yet they maintained stable populations of these animals which disappeared from their habitats only after 1948 (Ranjitsinh 1997:24, 58). These two instances are the earliest successful reintroductions of large carnivores in the world. The leopard and the tiger disappeared from these areas only because the two states themselves were wiped out of the political map of India.

About the same time, Maharaja Madho Rao Scindia of Gwalior (r. 1886–1925) introduced African lions near Shivpuri. However, this experiment failed as the animals became cattle-lifters and man-eaters and they had to be destroyed. He had to be content with shooting tigers only! The princes protected ‘their’ game within ‘their’ territories even if it was done for the not so egalitarian purpose of providing only themselves and their entourage with ‘sport’! Itinerants and vagrants from neighbouring principalities were *kosher shikar*, but again only for the select few.

The Symbol of State

The lion was equally important to Junagadh as its symbol. The sixth Nawab Mahbatkhanji II (1857–1882) is seen in a painting standing beside a gilded chair bearing lion armrests. Three Nawabs who succeeded him sat on similar chairs (Shiekh 1936) and the Nawabs sat on a *simhasana* (lion seat or throne), like any one of his Hindu brother princes during functions of state. In 1877 when Queen Victoria assumed the title of Empress of India, she presented a banner whose armorial bearings had rampant lions as supporters (Watson 1884, frontispiece). Nawab Rasulkhanji had adopted a medallion as a state emblem which had a mountain representing Girnar, a castle representing Junagadh, the ‘old fort’ after which the state took its name, with a rising sun, a lion couchant the pride of the state and symbol of royalty occupying a prominent place—the last two were symbols of the Mughals too—and three sailing ships representing the port of Veraval. This symbol continued to be used on state stationary, cutlery, crockery, glassware, etc. up to 1947 and for a while beyond. The last Nawab added to the lion symbolism by issuing postage stamps in 1929 with the Gir lion on it. This was a ‘first’ in the empire (Divyabhanusinh 1992) and it was done as explained by Mohmad Bhai, the *diwan* himself because the

... ‘Gir lion’ symbolises the survival of the Indian lion in the Gir forest of the state alone throughout India. The Gir lion accordingly is also one of the symbols in the Armorial bearings of this state (Wood and Meher 1998: 95).

The Last Nawab Protects Lions

The problems of protection of lions and their possible solutions had crystallised during the reign of Rasulkhanji. The British administration that followed was obliged to tackle the same problems too. Thus the stage was already set for the battles over the lion’s protection during Mahbatkhanji’s long reign. It is to his credit that he persevered regardless of the odds.

Within a year of his being invested with full powers, Mahbatkhanji was faced with a full blown lion crisis. He received a letter from Maharaja Jam

Saheb Ranjitsinhji of Navanagar better known to the cricketing world as 'Ranji', informing him that he and Maharaja Ganga Singh of Bikaner were invited by Darbar Muluwala of Pithadia-Jetpur (a Kathi Taluka enclave in Junagadh State) to shoot in the Mendarda portion of the Gir and requested the Nawab to permit him to shoot a lion. The Nawab's response was prompt and decisive. He informed Ranji that twelve lions had been shot in 1920 in neighbouring territories of other principalities which had become a subject of correspondence with the British Government. He went on to add that he was sure Bikaner would not think of shooting 'my lions' from such territories. Ranji requested the Nawab if he and Bikaner could visit him at Junagadh. The latter's reply was again unambiguous, he regretted he could not meet with them because of the approaching *Ramazan Id* and subsequent engagements in the state (GA, 1921, exchange of letters of 1,5,6 June)! Mahbatkhanji was so angered by all this that he sent a detailed letter to E. Maconochie, Agent to the Governor of Bombay at Rajkot, which bears quoting at some length as it hits upon the nub of the problem.

'As a matter of fact the real point at issue is the ownership of lions and the political right of inviting distinguished visitors to Kathiawad for lion shikar. ... what I complain of is that lions are tempted to stray outside by tying up buffaloes just over my borders ... This is nothing more or less than poaching from which I think I have a right to be protected by [the Imperial] government. If I were to take the law into my own hands, the result would be a constant series of border affrays which would endanger the peace of this part of Kathiawad.

It is an unquestionable fact that the house of the lion is the Gir forest and equally unquestioned that the forest is *my ancestral property*. The preservation of the forest which covers about 500 sq. miles [1295 km²] of my territory is supposed to be of value to the province as a whole, not only as a constant source of grass and fire wood, but also because of its effect on rainfall. But what has undoubtedly weighed with the Nawabs of Junagadh in the past and carries weight also with me is that the forest is the last sanctuary of Indian lions. If the lion were eliminated, I would certainly adopt a policy of disafforestation which would add to my revenues and simplify the difficulties of administration. The sacrifice that the neighbouring jurisdictional holders are called upon to bear by reason of the existence of the lions is small. The brunt of it is borne by Junagadh and ownership with all that it implies rightly appertains to Jungadh.

I would therefore ask that the [Imperial] Government may fully consider the matter and use their influence to see that my rights are respected and especially the scandal of tying up buffaloes within sight of my borders is stopped' (emphasis added. M.A., file no. 1438, Pol. Dept., letter of 29 June from Junagadh to AG).

E. Maconochie sent the matter up to A. Montgomery, Secretary to the Government, Political Department, Bombay stating that:

'... lions are a substantial nuisance to Junagadh's neighbours. The latter [small neighbouring states and Talukas] are impressed less than in former times by the prestige of the Nawab of Junagadh and are more inclined to stand by their right to shoot wild animals that are found in their own territory, a right which is not easy to question. [Ranji who was not a neighbour but a keen shikari] ... is constantly indulging in vicarious hospitality by promising distinguished personages a lion, if they will pay him a visit. Some of the Kathi Durbars are always anxious to oblige him and his poaching parties are a constant cause of exasperation to His Highness the Nawab ... to the average Englishman the whole question would seem to be one of ordinary gentlemanly feeling between neighbours. I doubt if [Ranji] would in England entice his neighbours' pheasants into his field and there shoot them. But apparently [he] sees nothing derogatory in tying up buffaloes all along the Junagadh border with a view to poaching lions.

The question now is what attitude the Imperial and local governments desire to adopt in the matter. If it is thought that the preservation of lions is a matter of Imperial interest ... it seems incumbent on the Imperial government to state its views clearly, to support the Nawab's monopoly and to bring such pressure as is possible to bear on Baroda and other states concerned. If they are not prepared to do this the only alternative seems to be to inform the Nawab ... that they are not prepared to take any definite action in the matter. Personally I am inclined to regard the lion as a dangerous anachronism, who does a lot of damage and wastes a great deal of my time and I should contemplate his final departure with equanimity.'

He ends the letter by saying that the Nawab's threat to destroy the forest need not be taken seriously as it would affect his own state (MA, file no. 1438, Pol. Dept., AG's letter to Sec. to the Govt. July, 1921). He was obviously at his wits' end and wanted the problem to simply go away. The Bombay government replied that it was not in a position to intervene though it would regret the complete disappearance of the lion (MA, file no. 1438, Sec. To the Govt.'s letter to AG, 8 Sept. 1921).

It is clear that the Nawab had put his total weight behind his efforts to save the lion. He claimed ownership of all lions by implicitly invoking his claim as successor to the Mughals in the peninsula, threatened inter-state relations and finally threatened to destroy the forest itself. This was as brave a stand as any prince could have taken against the imperial government and it is doubtful if there were many such examples in the early part of the twentieth century. He had no fall back position, it was his final stand. The imperial government did not oblige and various princes large and small, the *bêtes noires* of the Nawab, continued to shoot outside Junagadh. Baroda surprisingly claimed a right to

shoot four lions every year (Divyabhanusinh 2005, ch. 9). The neighbouring principalities had shot eighty nine lions between 1920 and 1943 as per the information available with the Junagadh State (JAR of the relevant years, see Divyabhanusinh 2005, Ch. 9) though the actual figure could have been higher as not all cases could have come to the attention of the state's administration.

It is obvious that while the Nawab's efforts ensured that the shooting of lions would be controlled within its boundaries, he had no control over what happened outside it. But the protection of lions which Junagadh gave showed results. Two estimates of lions were done in 1920. One by Sir Patrick Cadell and the other by J.M. Ratnagar of the Bombay Forest Service and they came up with vastly different figures of 'about 50' and 'at least 100' respectively. The next and last estimate done by Junagadh State was in 1937 when the internal reports show a count of 270 lions. However, J. Monteath, the *Diwan* from 1935 to 1938, thought it fit to declare that 'the total is not less than 150, I think' to his colleague Major C.W.L. Harvey, Secretary to the Agent to the Governor-General at Rajkot (GA, file no. 10/8, letter of 6 March, 1937) to keep the British and princely lion *shikaris* at bay.

The Nawab continued to battle for the lions until the very end of his rule in October 1947. As he left for the airport to catch the plane for Karachi, he had tears in his eyes as he looked, as it turned out for the last time, at the majestic Girnar mountain and said in a memorable *sotto voce* to no one in particular 'who will protect my lions now?' (Maharana Raj Saheb Pratapsinhji of Wankaver, *pers. comm.*, 2002). It was the end of an era for lions that began sometime in the 1870s. A new set of humans were to acquire control over their destiny, they were about to face fresh challenges and reprieves within the new political dispensation.

Independence and the Annexation of Junagadh

The year 1947 was a disaster for Junagadh State. As late as 29 April, *diwan* Mohmed Hussain issued a gazette notification stating that the state would accede to India. But Shah Nawaz Bhutto who succeeded him as *diwan* at this crucial juncture was able to influence the politically naive Nawab to make a monumental blunder to accede to Pakistan which spelt the doom of the Babi dynasty. The Nawab's decision was announced on 15 August, a day after Pakistan was born. His administration lost control steadily and he himself had to leave for Karachi on 24 October. A government-in-exile, *Arzi Hakumat*, had been set up at Rajkot and the state got annexed into the Dominion of India.

In 1947, Junagadh had 1720 km² of Gir forest, the Gaikwad's Baroda had 300 km², Bhavanagar 37 km², Jetpur 51 km², i.e. a total of 2111 km² (Mahesh Singh IFS, *pers. comm.* 1999). In addition, the jungle extended to other small principalities in the neighbourhood. The net effect was that the single largest chunk of the forest, the very heart of lion habitat, was exposed to a weakening administration and political uncertainties. Minor princelings, other nobility,

landlords and the like who would normally not have dared to poach inside Junagadh State's territories were emboldened, large mammals saw an unprecedented onslaught from such *shikaris*. *Chinkara* (Indian Gazelle), black-buck and other herbivores bore the brunt as these were delicacies to both the Rajput and Muslim palate, though the Kathis traditionally do not kill or eat antelope. E.P. Gee called it a 'wholesale killing of wildlife' particularly of herbivores (Gee 1964: 94). Those waiting to get a lion trophy, did their bit too. Several princes had sent their state forces to Junagadh to support the Dominion's forces. They too jumped into the fray. How many lions were killed during this period is an unknown figure. M.A. Wynter-Blyth records that seven lions were shot in these uncertain times in Jethpur State territory alone. The slaughter was exceptional (Wynter-Blyth 1949).

The United State of Saurashtra Improves Protection

Out of the chaos, Saurashtra was born. The new administration stepped in quickly to restore order, it took steps for the 'protection [of lions] even more strictly than before' according to Wynter-Blyth, who felt that 'they were in no danger of extinction, and an increase in numbers may well occur. Their only enemy seems to be man, and if left alone by him, I believe they will be able to look after themselves' (Wynter-Blyth 1950). In the event, his belief turned out to be correct. He himself conducted a census in 1950 and came up with a minimum figure between 217 and 227 lions and a maximum figure between 243 and 251, (Wynter-Blyth and Dharmakumarsinhji 1950) and this was in spite of all the depredations of 1947-48. These population estimates were based on the pug mark census technique which was refined from earlier practices by Wynter-Blyth and Dharmakumarsinhji for the first large mammal census in Independent India. The method was codified by the latter in a field guide for future efforts for the Government of India (Dharmakumarsinhji 1959) and which is followed with modifications for enumerating tigers to this day. The fact that the new Government of Saurashtra was counting lions is an indication of their concern for their survival, a fortuitous continuation of the princely tradition!

The creation of Saurashtra brought in its wake unforeseen benefits for the lion. Maharaja Jam Saheb Digvijaysinhji of Navanagar became head of state as *Rajpramukh* who kept the prerogative of permitting lion *shikar* in his own hands though there was a responsible democratic government in the state. For the first time, a single authority got control over the neighbouring principalities of Junagadh and the total number of lions to be shot, which was henceforth controlled by him, was around three per year. What Mahbatkhanji III and his father Rasulkhanji had fought for throughout their reigns finally came to pass.

The Dominion of India metamorphosed into a Republic, the State of Saurashtra went through an election for its legislature by adult suffrage in 1952. The State government continued lion protection vigorously until it was

merged with the Bombay State in 1956. However, the parameters of protection for lions did not change, in fact they improved. The administration of the state did not face the pressures that devolved on its successors in the 1960s and later, the old feudal restraint held the population in check and the administration remained effective.

The Present Scenario, a Brief Overview

With the reorganisation of the Indian polity on linguistic lines in 1956, the centre of authority shifted even further from Junagadh as it moved from Rajkot to Bombay only to come back to Gandhinagar in 1960. While princely *shikar* came to an end with these changes, the control of the administration on the Gir weakened, pressures of human and cattle populations had begun to tell on the forest and the lion population declined as per the estimates to about 166 in 1968 from a high of about 285 in 1963.

This was Gir's second crisis in two decades. It predated the realisation of a crisis of the tigers survival which was to give birth to the Project Tiger in 1973. The administration again responded because there was a political will to save *Gujarat's lions* at precisely the same time when the powers that were in the state allowed the tiger in Gujarat to slowly slip into extinction. The lion population grew over the decades to its present estimated strength of about 360 animals. But all is not well with the Gir. Increasing pilgrim traffic through the forest to Banej, Kankai and Tulsishyam, persistent demands and increasing vehicular traffic through it, increasing *maldhari* (cattle herders) and their cattle populations inside and increasing human and cattle populations on its periphery are slowly but certainly gnawing away at the forest which in any case is about half of what it was over a century ago.

The lions themselves have started moving out of the Gir protected area. It is estimated that some 60 of them live outside of it with no signs of their coming back, their range now covers some 8,500 km². Their old haunts which they have relocated and colonised without state help, cannot sustain viable populations. Their peripatetic nature and shrinking habitat is the cause of human-lion conflict as they prey on feral and other cattle near human habitations in the areas which is their home. The relative uneasy calm is deceptive as is borne out by persistent human attacks on lions and *vice versa*. The state has yet to take steps to protect the corridors which lions use to migrate out of the protected area of Gir and give effective protection to the pockets of forests and grasslands they have moved into. What the future holds for these is anyone's guess, but here is one compelling reason to send a few of them to a second home which is large enough to sustain a viable population.

It is pertinent to note here that the Gir forest's conditions were unique in many ways. By the late nineteenth century it was the only home of the lion left. This in itself imposed on the Nawabs and their administrations a responsibility which they readily shouldered. Moreover, it being at the time an in-

hospitable malarial tract—it continues to be stricken by the blight even today—it did not have a sizeable human population within it. In fact, the forest was worked systematically and forest villages were established to enhance state revenue. The *maldharis* who lived in the Gir were vegetarians unlike *adivasi* populations elsewhere. In a sense, such conditions lent themselves easily to Junagadh's determination to conserve the lion and its habitat yet, they do not take away anything from the laudable effort of the state which ultimately saved the forest and its precious denizens. The issue as Junagadh saw it was that of the ownership of lions, and their sole right to hunt them and protect them from the depredations of its neighbours and others.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Inevitably the question must be asked, was this a one off success story of conservation or are there other parallels? In princely India, only the prince and his entourage could shoot within each state as *shikar* was a royal prerogative. Whatever their motivations for conservation, their actions resulted in the protection of wild animals and their habitats. Both Mewar and Rewa as indeed scores of other princes, left sufficient fauna and flora for our republic to build on which it starkly failed to do as is testified by the tiger crisis of the 1970s. To a poor animal, a republican bullet is no less harmful than a princely one, but there were far fewer princely bullets. It is not an accident that scores of our national parks and sanctuaries were the hunting grounds of princes. In our times, conservation is still dependent on an administration based on princely Indian and imperial experience. To-date, the Indian state is the sole custodian of our natural resources as was the prince earlier or for that matter were the Maurya kings more than 2000 years ago. However, the sense of responsibility for wild animals is no longer personal in a democracy as they do not have votes to cast and the administration continues largely on the momentum of the past. It would be ideal if community or popular movements became successful enough to replicate their work across the country. Sadly, this has not happened at anywhere near the requisite scale in independent India. In this setting, the old 'model' may well have to continue as a starting point for conservation. The princely inheritance is too valuable to write off. The dilemma is: Is there time for our natural heritage to await a new dawn?

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