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The Royal Pastime: Charting the Diverse World of Mughal Hunting

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Abstract: *Hunting was a prestigious pastime among elites across cultures, serving both recreational and strategic functions. In India, royal hunting has a long history, with ambivalent attitudes evident in ancient texts like the Arthashastra and the epics. Despite ethical concerns, hunting remained central to aristocratic life, particularly under the Delhi Sultans and the Mughals. Babur emphasised its importance, and Akbar expanded its role into a tool of statecraft, military preparedness, and governance. The qamargha hunt, a large-scale organised hunt, reflected Mughal hierarchy and discipline. Women's participation in hunting, as seen in Humayunnama and Jahangirnama, highlights unique aspects of Mughal court culture. Hunting also reinforced the emperor's divine image, as evident in Ain-i-Akbari's accounts of Akbar's encounters with tigers and leopards. Later Mughal rulers continued the tradition, with some expressing ambivalence, as seen in Jahangir's vow to cease direct killing. Beyond its ideological and military functions, hunting remained an exhilarating form of recreation, where power and pleasure intersected. Ultimately, the Mughal hunt was a complex institution that symbolised dominance, governance, and personal enjoyment, reinforcing the emperor's supreme authority over both nature and society.*

Key Words: *Mughal Hunting, Royal Recreation, Qamargha, Imperial Symbolism, Court Culture.*

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For centuries, hunting has been regarded as a prestigious pastime among elites across diverse cultures. For royalty and nobility, hunting provided a significant recreational avenue while at the same time serving other vital functions deemed necessary for the king and the state. In India, royal hunting has been an established practice since the early historical period. The popularity of the practice is attested by the multitude of references scattered across literary and visual sources. Throughout the early historical period, an ambivalent attitude towards recreational hunting can be noticed. For example, in the Arthasastra, while hunting is considered a vice, Kautilya also enlists its beneficial effects on the king or the prince.[1] The epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata also contain several episodes of royal hunting. Marion Frenger has illustrated the mixed attitudes towards hunting in ancient India by analysing texts like Raghuvamsa, the Jatakas and the epics.[2] Emily Blanchard West's study of hunting episodes from Ramayana and Mahabharata has shown how, in these narratives, hunting often led to the subsequent misfortune of the hunter or his family, thus bringing the moral ambiguity of hunting to the fore.[3] In spite of such uneasiness, hunting for sport remained one of the most favoured pastimes of the aristocracy in South Asia. During the Mughals, the significance of hunting increased significantly, and the activity served many different ends. Hunting, or *shikar*, became a vital element of Mughal courtly culture and the elaborate symbolism of Mughal power. For the Mughals, especially Akbar, *shikar* transcended the bounds of mere recreational activity and became a tool for projecting Mughal power and keeping the state machinery well-drilled. This article aims to explore the significance of royal hunting during the Mughal era, emphasising its role as both a prestigious courtly pastime and a strategic tool of imperial power. It seeks to analyse how Mughal rulers used hunting to assert political authority, demonstrate military prowess, reinforce hierarchies of power, and gather vital first-hand information about the lives of the common subjects.

To understand the complex tapestry of Mughal hunting, I have used both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources used are mostly textual in nature, consisting of memoirs, biographies, court chronicles, and administrative treatises that provide valuable insights into the hunting practices of the Mughal royalty. Some of these texts were composed by the Mughal emperors themselves, while some were produced by close family members or court chroniclers. Secondary sources aid in critical analysis and contextualising Mughal hunting within broader social, cultural and political developments. The historiography of Mughal hunting is not very expansive, though some very insightful studies have enhanced our understanding of the area. M.N. Pearson, in his account of recreation in the Mughal period, has briefly dealt with hunting and its significance in courtly relations and military effectiveness.[4] Anand S. Pandian, in his comparative analysis of Mughal and colonial hunting cultures, has also stressed the role played by hunting in bolstering the position of the emperor and sustaining the emperor's relations with the different hierarchies of nobility.[5] S. Parpia has illustrated how the hunt was a part of the Mughal scientific enterprise, acting as a vital tool for the acquisition of knowledge. The study examines how Mughal hunting inspired scientific activity and art, while exploring its connections to religion, ethics, science, and governance.[6] Azmat Ali has

discussed the importance of hunting and military sports in improving the performance of the military and some aspects of administration. His primary focus is on the militaristic aspect of Mughal hunting.[7] In the following analysis, I have taken the aid of some of these studies to present a picture of the multifaceted nature of Mughal hunting.

Babur testified to the importance of hunting as a royal sport among the Mughals before their arrival in India in his autobiographical composition, *Baburnama.* While writing about the different regions of Farghana, Babur informs the readers about the quality of the hunting grounds and the availability of game animals and fowl. According to him, the hunting and fowling conditions in Andijan, Marghinan, Khujand and Akshi were excellent.[8] Elsewhere, while narrating his campaign against Tambal, Babur records that he went hunting every two or three days in pursuit of animals like deer, foxes, hares and pheasants. He also alludes to using hawks to kill pheasants.[9] Hawking or falconry remained integral to Mughal hunting mores during Babur's successors. The Baburnama also gives us a glimpse of the *qamargha*, a cherished feature of the elaborate hunting activities of the Mughals. The *qamargha* was a large circular formation of a large radius made by soldiers. As the soldiers moved inwards, they drove the animals towards the centre where the emperor and other high-ranking nobles awaited the prey.[10] The radius of the *qamargha* sometimes stretched to many kilometres, particularly during the reign of Akbar, when the royal hunt frequently attained spectacular proportions. In Humayunnama, Gulbadan Begum informs us about another interesting feature of Mughal hunting. During his exile in Persia, Humayun went out hunting with Shah Tahmasp eight times. Gulbadan Begum informs us that during these expeditions, Hamida Banu Begum, Humayun's wife, used to watch the hunt from a distance, sitting on a camel or horse litter. The Shah's sister, Shahzada Sultanam, used to venture further and take a stand behind the Shah. The involvement of women in outdoor recreational activities is in contrast to many other court cultures of the world. Such participation of the ladies of the harem in outdoor sports was, however, a common feature of Central Asia.[11] From the same source, we learn about another custom of Mughal culture. One instance narrates Humayun hunting alongside his brother Mirza Hindal, who handed over his hunted game to Humayun. Gulbadan Begum states that handing over the spoils of the hunt by a noble to his superior was a rule set by Chingiz Khan, which was still followed.[12] First, this shows the lasting influence of the founder of the Mongol Empire on Mughal norms and etiquette. Again, this also demonstrates how the hierarchy of the Mughal nobility found expression across diverse fields of activity, including recreation and sport. To an extent, this episode also reveals the highly elevated position of the monarch within the Mughal cosmos, a considerable departure from the Lodis they displaced.

The significance of the royal hunt as an activity with far-reaching utilitarian and ideological implications increased manifold during the reign of Humayun's successor, Akbar. This was due to a variety of factors. Of course, Akbar's interest in the actual act of hunting was a prime factor. However, the very broad significance that hunting attained was also due to the keenness of the emperor for ideological and military consolidation. All this could not have come down to us in such a detailed manner without the literary prowess of Abul Fazl. While hunting was much

more than a mere recreation for all Mughals, Akbar exemplified this approach. M.N Pearson has pointed out how Abul Fazl, while stating the significance of hunting, wrote: "He (Akbar) always makes hunting a means of increasing his knowledge, and besides, uses hunting parties as occasions to inquire, without first having given notice of his coming, into the condition of the people and the army. He travels incognito, and examines into matters referring to taxation, or to Sayurghal lands, or to affairs connected with the household. He lifts up such as are oppressed, and punishes the oppressors. On account of these higher reasons, His Majesty indulges in the chase, and shows himself quite enamoured of it"[13]

Here, Abul Fazl directly puts forward the multifaceted character of the royal hunt during Akbar's reign. One of the foremost benefits of the extensive hunting campaigns of Akbar was that they kept the military well-drilled and ready to undertake an actual military campaign at any moment. M.N. Pearson, while discussing recreation during the Mughal era, suggested the possibility of a correlation between the frequency of elaborate hunting campaigns and the efficacy of the Mughal army on the battlefield. He pointed out that during the reigns of Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb, the interest in hunting was relatively subdued and interestingly, their armies were significantly less effective than that of Akbar.[14] Akbar's blending of military exercise and hunting is borne out clearly through some events. In 1581, several high-ranking nobles revolted against Akbar and proclaimed his half-brother, Mirza Hakim Muhammad, as emperor. Akbar advanced with a massive army towards Kabul, the seat of Mirza Hakim. Rather than formally declaring the true purpose of the campaign, Akbar announced it as a hunting excursion. While this was a full-blown military campaign to subdue the rebels, the massive Mughal entourage kept hunting wild animals along the way. Monserrate informs us that orders were issued to prevent anyone from approaching the line of march to minimise the risk of treachery and prevent the frightening away of wild beasts.[15] This episode proves how the boundaries between a hunting and a military expedition can almost fade away, exhibiting the militaristic nature of Mughal royal hunts.

The practice of qamargha hunting almost inevitably involved considerable troop mobilisation. Akbar's successors also arranged qamargha hunts numerous times. As mentioned earlier, M.N. Pearson has pointed out reduced hunting activity during the rule of Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb. While that can certainly be true, there is no definitive way to know the frequency of elaborate royal hunts undertaken during the reign of these two emperors. This perceived reduction can also be due to the absence of a chronicler and propagandist like Abul Fazl, who left incredibly detailed accounts of every little aspect of Akbar's reign. We also get various references to qamargha hunts from the period of Akbar's successors. Jahangir, in his memoirs, the Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri, mentions the mobilisation of qamargha at several points. One interesting feature of Jahangir's account of such hunts is the appearance of women in the hunting field. At least on three occasions, Jahangir writes about taking along some of the ladies of the harem inside the hunting circle. Whether they actively participated or were spectators remains unknown. This was also in line with the broader tendency of increased public visibility of harem ladies during Jahangir's reign, which was epitomised by Nur Jahan.[16] The Shahjahannama, written by

Inayat Khat, is dotted with references to Shah Jahan going on hunting expeditions, including the arrangement of the qamargha.[17] From the Maasir-i-Alamgiri, we know that Aurangzeb also frequently engaged in the hunt. The writer, Saqi Mustaid Khan, narrates an event where two men were killed by deer in the process of the closing in of the qamargha circle. Such accidents, in fact, were not uncommon, and the foot soldiers were the most common victims.[18] We also get several references to Aurungzeb residing in different hunting lodges spread across the empire in the same text. It becomes clear that even if Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb were somewhat less enthusiastic than their predecessors, hunting remained a major royal activity.

Alongside its role in maintaining military efficacy, the royal hunt served other functions within the framework of Mughal kingship. The mastery of the emperor over the wilderness, both its terrain and the beasts, served to prop up an image of the emperor which emanated immense power. The emperor could also claim to be the guardian and protector of the many people whose lives and livelihoods were endangered by wild animals. In the Ain-i-Akbari, Abul Fazl lists some of the chief methods of tiger hunting that were in vogue. These included setting up a cage trap with a live bait inside, setting up a poisoned arrow which could go off on its own when the bush is shaken by the tiger and setting up a glue trap with a live bait. However, we are told that Akbar, from his straightforwardness, does not like these tricks. Instead, he prefers to openly hunt with a bow or matchlock and kill these beasts which destroy so many innocent lives. Akbar's ingrained fairness is highlighted here as he not only protects his subjects from tigers by hunting them down but even refuses to use deceptive tricks on the tiger.[19] Abul Fazl also lists at least two occasions where Akbar saved someone from being mauled by a tiger by valorously killing the beast. In another extraordinary incident, while hunting near Mathura, a tiger appeared near one of his associates who had gone far ahead. Akbar, from his spot, stared down furiously at the tiger. The tiger, recoiling under the 'divine glance', turned and left the spot.[20] The section on tiger hunting ends with Abul Fazl's statement that such brave achievements of the emperor are too many to list. Leopards were often caught and trained to aid in future hunts. The Ain-i-Akbari further narrates two incidents involving Akbar that reinforce his supposedly 'divine' image. Abul Fazl writes: "A rather remarkable case is the following. Once a leopard had been caught and, without previous training, on a mere hint by His Majesty, it brought in the prey like trained leopards. Those who were present had their eyes opened to truth, and experienced the blessing of prostrating themselves in belief on His Majesty."[21] In another incident, "Attracted by the wonderful influence of the loving heart of His Majesty, a leopard once followed the imperial suite without collar or chain, and like a sensible human being, obeyed every command…"[22] The presentation of these two episodes not only invests Akbar with valour and divinity but also plays a crucial role in cementing his exalted position vis-a-vis the Mughal nobility, whose belief in the superhuman superiority of Akbar was established through such episodes. Anand S. Pandian has pointed out how hunting played an important role in fostering and reinforcing the hierarchy of relations within the Mughal administrative structure. The royal hunt, Pandian argues, acted "...as a stage for the very rituals of incorporation that constituted the hierarchical order of the empire."[23] Particularly within

the qamargha, the imperial hierarchy was closely replicated. After the emperor had hunted, sometimes along with a few chosen close associates, other nobles were led into the circle. After the nobles, court servants were allowed in, and finally, the soldiers had their share.[24] Tiger hunting remained an activity which bolstered the image of the sovereign as the protector of the people. In a tiger hunt by Jahangir, the tiger had attacked and injured several people. However, in the end, Jahangir writes, "...I polished it off with three shots and eliminated the menace to the people."[25] The privilege of guarding the subjects could also be bestowed on Mughal princes. Jahangir narrates another incident where a man-eating tiger was harassing the people, and he sent his son Shah Jahan to "eliminate the menace."[26]

Hunting also gave the emperor an opportunity to showcase clemency, magnanimity, or dispense justice. It was on a hunting expedition that Akbar decided to abolish the jizya tax on Hindus.[27] In another incident narrated by Abul Fazl, Akbar, while out hunting with some of the harem ladies, dispensed justice. He wrote, as quoted by Pearson, "Though hunting was the object, yet many oppressed persons obtained justice; and many refractory persons were chastised." M.N. Pearson has argued that such events exhibited the intersection of recreation, harem politics and administration of justice.[28] Jahangir recorded another such episode where hunting allowed the interaction between the Mughal sovereign and his common subjects. He wrote: " Since coming to Kabul we had not experienced a qamargha hunt. Now that the hour was drawing nigh to return to Hindustan, and I was very anxious to hunt red antelope, I ordered Mount Qoruq, seven kos from Kabul, to be quickly surrounded. On Tuesday, the fourth of Jumada [August 17] I set out to hunt. Nearly a hundred antelopes came into the qamargha. Half of them were hunted down. It was a really exciting hunt. Five thousand rupees were given away as tips to the ryots who were there."[29] This passage succinctly illustrates several aspects of the Mughal hunt while highlighting how it enabled the emperor to directly reach out to inhabitants of the vast empire. Royal clemency was also sometimes showered on wild animals. In the section in the Ain-i-Akbari which lists Akbar's sayings, Abul Fazl informs us that the emperor has cautioned that kings should avoid excessive hunting, incessant play, too much inebriation and constant sexual encounters. Further, according to Akbar, "Although hunting suggests many analogies of kingly action, certainly the foremost of them is that the granting of life [to the doomed] becomes a habit."[30] Along with the idea of clemency, Akbar's statement also betrays an ambivalence regarding the morality of hunting itself. This was nothing new, as hunting had evoked mixed reactions and sentiments since the very early days of Indian history. Such notions of clemency and the ambivalence regarding the killing of animals for sport are reflected through an interesting development in Jahangir's life. In 1618, Shuja, son of Shah Jahan, fell seriously ill. Jahangir, being very fond of his grandson, was distraught. When all the medications were failing to bring Shuja back to consciousness, Jahangir started praying to God as a last resort. At this juncture, Jahangir writes, "...it occurred to me that inasmuch as I had promised God to stop shooting animals and not to harm any living thing with my own hand after completing my fiftieth year, if I ceased this activity as of this date with an intention for Shuja's recovery, his life might possibly be the means for saving a number of animals.

God answered my prayer. In short, I made a solemn and honest undertaking with God that henceforth I would not harm any living thing with my own hand, and through divine grace the child's illness disappeared."[31] Implicit in this remarkable passage is Jahangir's keen awareness of the immorality of killing animals for mere sport — an attitude common in our times but hard to come by in premodern society except within religious ideologies which emphasise non-violence, like Buddhism and Jainism. Following this event, Jahangir refrained from personally killing animals during hunts. However, he did engage in hunting with hawks and falcons, he just kept his promise of not killing animals with his own hands. Even such an abstinence was surely to emphasise the clemency of the emperor within the Mughal courtly world.

Finally, while the various significances of Mughal hunting—military preparedness, political symbolism, and social hierarchy—have been central to this discussion, it is important to acknowledge its fundamental nature as a form of recreation. Hunting, despite its strategic and ideological functions, was an exhilarating pursuit that provided Mughal rulers and nobles with a sense of personal gratification. The thrill of the chase, the skill required in the act, and the sheer spectacle of the event must have made it an enjoyable activity, reinforcing its enduring presence in Mughal court life. The grandeur of the hunt, the vast landscapes traversed, and the elaborate preparations suggest that it was not merely a duty or a performance of power but also a pleasurable escape from the demanding routine of governing a vast empire.

Mughal hunting was far more than a recreational diversion; it was a complex and dynamic institution that encapsulated the ideals, strategies, and contradictions of imperial power. As this article has demonstrated, hunting served multiple purposes in the Mughal world—military, political, ideological, and symbolic. It functioned as a mechanism of statecraft, a performance of sovereign authority, and a means of reinforcing the hierarchical structure of court society. Emperors like Akbar turned the hunt into a mobile court, using it to dispense justice, gather intelligence, and maintain military preparedness. The practice of qamargha, with its elaborate organisation and rigid structure, embodied the discipline and order central to Mughal governance.

The symbolic dimension of the hunt was equally significant. By mastering wild animals and hostile landscapes, Mughal rulers projected an image of divine kingship and moral authority. Accounts of emperors confronting tigers or controlling leopards through sheer presence, as found in the Ain-i-Akbari, were not merely anecdotes but carefully crafted moments of imperial propaganda that reinforced the ruler's godlike image. These narratives blurred the line between natural and supernatural, suggesting that the emperor's power extended not only over people but over nature itself.

The inclusion of women in the hunting field, as seen in the Humayunnama and Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri, reveals another interesting feature of Mughal court culture, one that, while still patriarchal, allowed for limited participation of women in elite recreational practices. Again, the expressions of clemency and restraint, particularly visible in Jahangir's later renunciation of direct violence, highlight the varied ethical considerations around hunting, reflecting royal attitudes toward violence, religion, and kingship.

Finally, the hunt remained a space of thrill and pleasure. Despite its utilitarian and symbolic significance, the joy of the chase and the grandeur of the spectacle provided Mughal emperors with an immersive form of leisure. It was in the overlapping zones of delight and discipline, spectacle and sovereignty, that Mughal hunting achieved its distinctive identity. Thus, Mughal hunting was not a singular or static practice but a rich and layered phenomenon where politics, performance, ideology, administration and recreation intersected. Understanding it offers us valuable insights into the nature of Mughal culture and the nature of its kingship.

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