

Pune menagerie

D. B. Parasnis Rao Bahadur

In the last issue of BW&T Dr. L.C. Rookmaaker contributed an article about some art objects (paintings, models) giving indication of a menagerie in Pune. Rookmaaker's comment at the end of his article that it would be "interesting to know more about this Royal Menagerie of Mudarrao Narrian Peshwa in Pune in 1790" can be very well satisfied by this fascinating report of the Peshwa's menagerie in Pune is taken from a book called Pune in Bygone Days which was published in London in 1921.



Sir Charles Malet had the Peshwa's animals made up in clay models by an very talented Indian artist. A painting was done with Malet in the centre of all his animal models which is preserved in the historical collections at Satara.

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 anything made a more lively impression on my mind, than a visit which I paid to the Peshwa's menagerie, at the foot of the hill of Pahrbutty. It then contained some of the

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. 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."

"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 hogs-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.

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."

In this menagerie there were a number of tame deer and antelopes some of which were of a beautiful 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."

Forgotten collector of Asian Animal Life -- Alan Owston, Merchant & Naturalist

The June 1998 issue of National Geographic contains a note about a little known amateur collector of Asian natural history, Mr. Alan Owston. Scientists of the day revered him and many animals have been named after him, yet he is practically unknown today. Owston was born in England and moved to Japan in 1871 as a merchant and naturalist. He married a local woman, was instrumental in founding the Yokohama Yacht Club, died and was buried in Japan. Herman Reiswig, deep sea sponge specialist from McGill University came across specimens collected by Alan Owston in the major museums. Bringing him to National Geographic's attention, Reiswig described his collections as "immaculate, exquisite". He was a "voracious collector" on land or sea. Carnegie Museum of NH has 1,364 of his Asian fish. The British Museum obtained his "splendid" collection of sponges. The Smithsonian Institution has reptiles, fish and birds collected by Owston. There is an illustration in National Geographic of a crested kingfisher and sharp tailed sandpiper lying beside a 1903 illustration of a fish captured by Owston. Of the animals named after him are included a frog, a clam, a crab, a woodpecker and others.

Books of Interest

Published:

- Gardens of Empire : Botanical Institutions of the Victorian British Empire, by Donal P. McCracken, Leicester University press, August 1997, 256 pp, 30 b/w illus, Hb 0 7185 0109 8, 50 pounds.
- The European Discovery of Indian Flora, Ray Desmond, Royal Botanic Gardens, Oxford University Press, 1992, 355 pp., 60 pounds.
- Nature and the Orient : The Environmental History of South and South East Asia. Richard H. Grove, Vinita Damodaran, Satpal Sangwan, Eds. Oxford University Press, Delhi. 1998, 1036 pp. Rs. 1250.

In Press:

Encyclopedia of the World's Zoos, Catherin Bell, 2000 (in press), Fitzroy Dearborn, \$US250 est price. This will be a two volume reference on zoos and zoo subjects, many of which will have historic components. There will also be three articles specifically on world zoo history. Several Indian and Asian zoos are covered as well as R. B. Sanyal.

Zoo and Aquarium History: Ancient Animal Collections in Zoological Gardens edited by Vernon Kisling and Jim Ellis, 1999 (in press), CRC Press. This will be a world history from ancient times to the present. MUCH coverage of Indian and Asian zoos.