Chapter 3

Herein the British Nimrod
May View a New and Arduous
Species of the Chase

Hunting Narratives and
the British Raj, 1757–1857

The creation of hierarchies and strategic alliances forms the very bedrock of imperialism. What better lens, then, to study the workings of imperialism than an activity that is arguably the most fundamentally hierarchical of all, and one that, when used in the human context, usually refers to the pursuit and killing of one set of living beings by another not just for food, but often for a variety of reasons that include pleasure or “sport”? Although both the ceremonial hunt of shikar, as well as more plebian hunting (for food, for example) had been a part of native Indian cultures for centuries, hunting narratives written by Englishmen during the Raj provide one of the richest windows through which to glimpse the fascinating workings of colonialism. To begin with, the tensions between colonizer and colonized may be understood in terms of the different ways in which they approached the activity of hunting, and brought very different perspectives to bear on questions of how to hunt, what to hunt, and with whom to go hunting. Simultaneously, hunting operated as a site for the formation of alliances between disparate groups of people—and species.¹

Chapter Three examines some of the complex ways in which hunting narratives allow access to a deeper understanding of the early years of the East India Company from about 1757 until 1858, when Company rule

S. Rajamannar, Reading the Animal in the Literature of the British Raj
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ended and colonialism proper could be said to have begun. The chapter is further divided into two periods. The first, “Of White Mughals, Princely Dharma and the Great Indian Deer Park: Hunting and the Early Presence of the British in India,” uses hunting to analyze relevant commonalities between British and Indian cultures during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the early Company-wallahs were relatively accepting of Indian culture. I conclude this section with an examination of Daniel Johnson’s *Sketches of Field Sports as followed by The Natives of India as Followed by the Natives of India with Observations on the Animals*. The second period, “1800–1857: Hunting and the Civilizing Mission,” investigates the role of the hunt in pre- and early-Victorian India, and concludes with a reading of Captain Thomas Williamson’s influential two-volume work, *Oriental Field Sports*.

**Of White Mughals, Princely Dharma, and the Great Indian Deer Park: Hunting and the Early Presence of the British in India**

Elucidating his “surplus energy” theory of imperialism in India and the Caribbean, historian Ronald Hyam writes: “the enjoyment and exploitation of black flesh was as powerful an attraction as any desire to develop economic resources” (135). One could just as cogently assert that, particularly in India, the enjoyment and exploitation of flesh, specifically non-human flesh—the chase of it, the taste of it, the gaze at it—was one of the most powerful attractions for the British right from the earliest days of the East India Company, when “White Mughals” and other officials of the East India Company reveled in the “tawny sybils,” nautch girls (and boys), multiple bibis—and the glorious shikar—that their adopted country had to offer (Baron 125).

But then, those early white mughals of varying degrees had loved most things about indigenous Indian culture. Many, for instance, had lived like Indians at home and in their offices. The first two governor-generals of India had been committed to Indian culture, with the traditional native lifestyle marking the culture of the British Indian political arena during their governance. James Morris describes the early Company-wallahs thus:

[They were] a swashbuckling, showy, amoral [sort]…often with Indian mistresses, generally with Indian friends, and cherishing little sense of racial or religious superiority. They did not wish to change the sub-continent—it would have seemed a preposterous ambition. They…did their plundering,