

# Narratives of Hunting in Indian Animation Films: A Critique

Utjala Barman

## Abstract

The hunting discourse abounds in cultural texts and historical documents from the Vedic Age to the age of the Mauryas, Guptas, Rajputs, Mughals and British Raj shows that hunting was extensively practised in India either for sustenance, protection or for sport. The representation and narratives of hunting in the discourse exhibit the different tools, methods and the purpose of the hunter as well as signify the social strata, power and culture of the times. As such, the narratives of hunting played a pivotal role in the story line of cultural texts. In this connection, the paper attempts to examine the different facets of hunting as represented in the Indian Animation films.

**Keywords:** Cultural texts; Hunting; Power; Social Strata.

Hunting is an age-old practice in Indian civilisation and in pre-agricultural era, every man is a hunter. Hunting in the early period was required for existence, viability, sustenance and protection, but with the development of settled society "hunting became a favourite pastime for influential people like the royals and nobility" (Lodh 190). In fact, it was an inseparable part of the ideology of kingship in ancient India where the royal hunt was necessary to showcase manly and bravery skills. Along with royal hunting, tribal hunting using traditional tools has also been practised in India. The narrative discourse and historical documents from the Vedic to the British colonial times of India corroborated extensive practice of hunting in India (A History of Hunting in the Indian Subcontinent). Since hunting has been practised down the ages in India, so hunting has played an important role in the narratives of cultural texts. It is in this context, the paper attempts to critique the different facets of hunting from the narratives of Indian animation films.

With the arrival of television into the Indian households, the Indian cartoons along with Disney cartoons gradually became quite popular among the Indian masses. In the beginning Indian animation films or television series draw its plot mainly from the mythical stories and folktales such as *The Mahabharata*, *The Ramayana*, *The Panchatantra* and *The Jataka Tales* where hunting has played an integral part in the course of the storyline of these cultural texts. The animation film *Pandavas: The Five Warriors* (2000) begins with the remorse of Pandu's curse that he has received during his royal hunt. The royal hunt is a necessary exercise to display courage and masculine power for any ambitious ruler. In the pre-agricultural period, hunting was necessary as man foraged for meat which was the source of food but "hunting for sport became popular with the arrival of the Aryans around 1500 BC" by the royals and nobles (A History of Hunting in the Indian Subcontinent). It is observed that royal hunting for sport is an important activity for toning the body and sharpening marksman skills. Conquering the wild and the strongest who lives in forest becomes necessary for any ambitious ruler to display his power. Any settled society would like to have a control over the forest and its dwellers as forest is considered to be a land of fantasy as well as a dangerous space which needs to be tamed by powerful men. Kanad Sinha has rightly pointed out that "the royal hunting expedition with a full-scale military entourage, often taking the form of raid on nature could have been a mechanism of asserting the settled society's control over the forest" (41).

Hunting in India can be traced back to the Stone Age and evolves constantly with time through the monarchies of Mauryas, Guptas, Rajputs, Mughals, and Colonial India exhibiting different hunting tools, methods, politics and culture. Historical documents shows that the Indian state had asserted its claim over the forest and its dwellers. Sayan Lodh mentions that Harrappan seals depict animals like tigers, elephant and rhinoceros which may have been hunted by people (191). In the early Vedic period, the consumption of meat was not uncommon and so, animals such as deer were hunted regularly. In many occasions hunting through sacrificial altars has been practised through religion. In fact, animal sacrifice being a prevalent custom of the early period led to the killings of several animals at the sacrificial altars by the Aryans and "the blackbuck and the sambhar, which were revered animals of that age were offered as sacrifice to the gods" (A History of Hunting in the Indian Sub-continent). The Vedic religious rites of ancient India also demanded the killing of the horse as sacrifice known as the Aswamedha Yagna where a horse was released by a king to establish his imperial sovereignty and allowed to roam freely for a year to any other foreign territory. The king's warriors followed the horse

and if any ruler from any kingdom did not pay tribute to the horse or recognise the king's sovereignty, then the king and his warriors had to defeat the ruler in a battle. But if the horse was not captured during the year, then it was victoriously brought back to the capital and the horse was, then, sacrificed at a great public ceremony accompanied by much feasting and celebration. This killing of horse legalises his divine rights and power. This practice is mentioned in The *Ramayana* when Rama held the sacrificial ritual of the Aswamedha yagna. However, during the Mauryan age, Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and the inscriptions of Asoka shows the "importance of forest resources as well as the state dichotomous relationship with the forest dwellers" (Sinha 41). The Mauryas relied on the nomads and hunters to control their large empire where elephants were extracted as tributes from the chiefs of forest tribes because elephants were largely useful in battle field (Lodh 192). Certain animals were given utmost protection by the state realising their value in the battle field. Asoka, the grandson of Chandragupta Maurya gave up royal hunting after embracing Buddhism and banned the killing of certain animals and birds which were neither useful nor edible. However, after the decline of the influence of Buddhism, there was the resurgence of hunting by kings and commoners. Royal hunting was practised during the Gupta period as "there are depictions of the king as a hunter on Gupta coins which describes him the vanquisher of the powerful wild animals, a metaphor used to show his control over men, animals, forests and dominance over adversaries" (Lodh 193).

The arrival of the Sultan rulers in the medieval period brought the different facets of hunting and its uses. Sayan Lodh writes that the Mughal rulers categorized animals for different uses - "animals for hunting like lions, tigers; animals for royal use like cheetah, elephants; and exotic animals like zebra, turkey, dodo and African elephants to gift to Emperors" (191). The Sultans have also kept reserved forests for their personal hunting as a means of relaxation and sports to keep themselves fit and to learn survival skills. However, the Mughals allowed the peasants and commoners to hunt certain small animals and birds for meat with some restrictions in their royal hunting ground. Two popular methods of hunting - "Qamargha and the Shakhbandh" were used in the Mughal period where the emperor and his nobles circle the hunt with guns, arrows and spears, or a stockade in place of the circle of men (Lodh 196). The hunt was carried out by a group of local hunters called 'shikharis' which was headed by a head shikari. They tracked the animal on foot while the king and other noblemen rode on horse or elephant back. When the animal was found, they dragged the animal to the corner by beating drums, or

using sticks. Then the king would shoot the animal followed by the noblemen. The king fired the bullet first as royalty bestowed on him. However, these methods were not suitable to kill ferocious animals like lion or tiger. The weapons used during the Mughal period included guns such as the Khasban, Khursan, matchlocks, pistols and muskets as well as primitive tools such as the bow and arrow, spears, daggers and swords. *Akbarnama* and *Ain-i-Akbari* recorded the hunting of lion by Akbar. The *Badshahnama* records Shah Jahan hunting with guns called "Khasban and Khurasan". Moreover, wild meat was highly prized and animal meat like venison and bird meat like quail and partridge were there in their cuisine. The Mughal paintings provide a great source of knowledge about the hunts and the types of animals hunted. Along with the Mughals, the Rajputs were also fond of hunting where the paintings from "Kota depicts lion with a black mane" (Lodh 196). Viewed from the perspective of a Rajput ethos, hunting for Rajput king was a means to demonstrate war skill and unflappable courage. Royal hunt for Rajput also proves the king as virile and capable of protecting the subjects as well as to display the ideal characteristics of their genealogical descent from the divine hero Rama, who was a warrior and a hunter. No doubt the Mughal period witnessed a steady decline in wildlife population due to any legal restriction, even then there was an abundance of wild animals before the arrival of the Britishers in India.

But during the British rule in India, a large number of animals became scarce in British ruled territories when the British officials too started to hunt tigers and lions to sustain their hegemony in India by proclaiming themselves as supreme hunters and saviours in order to legitimise their imperial rule in India. Like a sovereign hunter over all beasts the Britishers legitimised the hunting of tigers by labelling tiger as man-eater, animal with a desire for human flesh. In this context, Jim Corbett's stories *The Man-Eaters of Kumaon* can be mentioned (Lodh 199). The Indian princes too devoted their time and energy towards hunting in lieu of the lost political power. Lodh writes that "hunting became an ethic among the princes, by creating royal hunting reserves in princely states of India". However, it also became a rite of passage into adulthood. "Newly crowned princes from Reva in central India, considered slaying of 109 tigers providential. The Big Game Diary of Sadul Singh, the ruler of Bikaner, printed in 1936, provides a catalogue of all his hunts over a quarter century including 33 tigers, and a lion" (197). The British with the help of Indian princes from the princely states turned the wild landscape into mere sporting ground thereby declining the extended area of wild landscape. The native shikaris too hunted animals in large numbers but it is interesting to observe that the Britishers regarded the native shikaris as tribal or low-caste despite

their heavy reliance on the native shikaris for knowledge and assistance and even stigmatized the native shikaris as poachers if they act on their own. (Ray 453). During the Indian Independence Movement, hunting increased to many cases as anyone who possessed guns could join in hunting expeditions. Tribal hunting in the form of using traditional hunting tools or trapping certain specific species of animal is also found in India's past for the tribal customary right or for the intake of meat. Thus, the account of hunting down the ages shows lack of strict laws or of possessing any reserved forest in the past to restrict hunting, thereby, leading to the large extinctions of fauna from the Indian soil. And, as such, cultural texts have represented the different dimension of hunting down the ages including the Indian animation films. The narrative accounts of hunting found in works of literature such as *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* played a pivotal role in the storyline of these texts.

The animation film *Pandavas: The Five Warriors* is based on the five Pandava brothers from the Indian epic *The Mahabharata*. The film is technically directed by Usha Ganesharaja and Venkatesh Babu G. and produced by Pentamedia Graphics Limited. The film begins with the narrative that Pandu, once the king of Hastinapur went to deep grief for his incapability of producing Kuru clan due to his curse. He had to renounce his kingdom and went to forest to atone the curse that he had received. The curse that he had received was connected to his royal hunt. Royal hunt is the tradition of kshatriyahood, one who needs to manifest in the form of animal hunting in order to legitimise kingship, his divine rights but turned out to be a curse on Pandu. According to the epic *The Mahabharata*, Pandu had mistakenly shot arrows at the sage Kimdama and his wife who were making love in the form of deer and doe when he went for hunting with his second wife Madri. The sage imprecated a curse on Pandu that sexual copulation would cause him death, thereby, ended his possibility of having a biological child. Pandu was the son of Vyasa and Ambalika and he was an excellent archer and political administrator. After the death of his father, he was crowned the king of Hastinapur as his elder brother Dhritrashtra was blind and not eligible to sit on the throne of Hastinapur. Indeed, Pandu proved to be the strongest king of Bharatvarsha and conquered the territories of the Sindhu Kingdom, Kashi, Anga, Trigarta, Kalinga and Magadha kingdom. But the hunting episode proved to be the misfortune turn of his life.

It is to be noted that the royal hunt may lead to dangerous consequence for the king as seen in the case of Pandu. As a Kshatriya he went to the royal hunt but the forest turned out to be dangerous space and made him

childlessness, without lineage and ancestors. Regretting his action and suffering from the incapability of bearing his own Kuru clan he decided to abandon the royal lifestyle and became an ascetic. He stepped down from his kingship and left the kingdom with his two wives, Kunti and Madri. However, his wives could give birth to the Pandavas through Kunti's special boon of calling the gods and impregnating them. Hence, the Pandavas inherited divine qualities from their celestial fathers to defeat the Kauravas in the Kurushetra war. This hunting episode is the crux of the development of the storyline in the epic. If Pandu had not been cursed, he would not have stepped down from his kingship. Then Duryodhana would not have risen to cruel power nor the Kurushetra war took place. Pandu died when he made love with Madri forgetting the curse of Kimdama caused from hunting and Madri filled with remorse performed Sati during the funeral of Pandu. Pandu's death resulted from the royal hunt and its curse. In this context, Kanad Sinha has rightly pointed out "the forest seems to fight back in a way, transforming the man who had entered it as an aggressor, turning the hunter in the hunted" (41). The film also shows the scene of Arjuna's shooting the eye of a bird illustrating hunting as a rite of passage into adulthood especially into a trained skilled archer in order to explore his scope of kingship. However, with the formation of the caste system, the legendary epic *The Mahabharata* also shows that hunting is the privilege right of the royals and the occupation of the lower classes. In the epic, when Eklavya's thumb was asked by Dronacharya as Guru Dakshina, it throws light that low-caste Eklavya could not become great archer like kings despite his exemplary shooting skills. It can be interpreted that hunting skills for low-caste community was only necessary for foraging their food not to become great warrior like Arjuna and hence, hunting is connected to social hierarchy and power to royal community.

*Ramayana: The Legend of Prince Rama* (1993) is an animated film co-produced by Japan and India and directed by [Yugo Sako](#), Koichi Sasaki and Ram Mohan. The film is based on the Indian epic *The Ramayana* by Valmiki. The legendary Prince of Ayodhya, Rama, is exiled for fourteen years to the forest where his wife Sita is abducted by Ravana, the king of Lanka. The plot of this film largely deals with Rama's fight with Ravana in order to release Sita from his abduction. However, interestingly, Sita's abduction episode is linked with her desire to possess the golden deer which Rama went to chase it and eventually killed it by shooting an arrow. Maricha disguised himself into a golden deer who had the power of changing himself into any form allured Rama far into the forest and before he was killed by Rama by an arrow, he cried out the names of Lakshmana and Sita in the voice of Rama. When Sita heard Maricha's crying in the

voice of Rama, she sent Lakshmana to go for Rama's help. During Rama and Lakshmana's absence Ravana approached Sita in the form of an ascetic and abducted her to Lanka. The episode of Sita's desire of possessing the golden deer and Rama's shooting the deer turned out to be miserable to both Sita and Rama as they were separated. Similarly, the curse of Dasarath, the father of Rama resulted from hunting is the pivotal episode for later development in the storyline, the exile of Rama in the forest. A boy named Shraavan Kumar took his blind parents on a pilgrimage and they arrived in a forest near Ayodhya. He went to fetch water in the river Sarayu when his parents felt thirsty. Dasarath, the king of Ayodhya had also come there for hunting and he had the unique skill of shooting just by hearing the sound of the animal. He shot Shraavan Kumar when he dipped vessel to collect water hoping to be an animal. When Dasarath went to collect his kill, he found his arrow struck a boy. Shraavan Kumar requested Dasarath to give water to his parents and to tell the sad news before he died. His parents were deeply aggrieved at the loss of their child and they died. But before their death, the grief-stricken parents cursed Dasarath by saying that as they were dying because of their son's loss, he too would experience Putrashoka, grief due to loss of a son. Shraavan Kumar's tragic death and the curse on Dasarath triggered the entire events of the Ramayana. Dasarath had granted two boons to one of his three wives, Kaikeyi when she saved him during a battle. The day before Rama was to crown the king of Ayodhya, Kaikeyi demanded the two boons as promised earlier. First to send Rama into exile in the forest and secondly, to crown her son, Bharat as the king of Ayodhya. Bound by his word to Kaikeyi, a heartbroken Dasarath reluctantly send Rama into exile. Rama's exile to the forest separates Dasarath from his son which is the effect of Shraavan Kumar's parents' curse on Dasarath. The royal hunt is the root cause of king Dasarath's curse and his death due to his separation from his son.

The hunting episode has significant role in the development of the plot in these two epics. Royal hunting is an exercise to display masculine traits in the forest where the spirit of the forest is considered feminine but dangerous in the Rigvedic Hymn of Aranyani (Sinha 42). The prakriti which is represented by forest needs to be controlled by the royal people in the form of hunt. In this context, Sinha rightly says king epitomised the masculinity of the settled society marched out to subdue the dangerous but beautiful feminine forest by killing or manacles tiger, lion, deer, boars and elephants (43). However, in many cases kings failed to tame the forest, the forest fights back ferociously in the form of some natural force or curse and the above instances of the storyline from these two epics shows how

risks a royal hunt can offer.

Narratives of hunting is also found in The *Panchatantra* and The *Jataka Tales*. *Bhimsain's Ek Anek Aur Ekta* (1974) is a short animated educational film based on the strength of unity. *Ek Anek Aur Ekta* (One, Many and Unity) is a short iconic animation film directed by Vijaya Mulay and tele-cast in Doordarshan. The film was designed and animated by Bhimsain Khurana, produced by the National Council of Educational Research and Training and presented by the Films Division of India. The plot of the film is taken from the *Panchatantra Tales*. The *Panchatantra Tales* is a collection of an Indian fables in Sanskrit verse and prose, arranged within a frame story probably written around 200 BC. In this film the narrative of hunting becomes the core of the film. The theme of the film is illustrated from the fable "the hunter and the doves". Once a flock of doves were trapped in a net set by a hunter while trying to eat grains. However, the birds flew together and went to their friends, rats who tore the nets. This way the rats freed them. The moral of the story that 'strength lies in unity' is the theme of the film. The hunting of birds reflects hunting in this tale is for the intake of meat food as birds are weaker than lions and cannot be for sports. It can be read the cuisine of the time when the intake of meat of "some birds was considered purer" (Lodh 192). It also shows the hunting tools of using nets and methods to trap certain animals and birds.

Similarly, *The Banyan Deer* (1957), an animated film is based on hunting. *The Banyan Deer* is the first animated film in colour directed by Govind Saraiya and produced by the Film Divisions of India. The film is based on Buddhist Jataka tales which are part of sacred Buddhist literature. The *Jataka Tales* is a collection of 547 stories which is a rich voluminous body of fables, tales of adventure, legend and maxims found in Buddhist writings. The film revolves around the story of two golden herds of deer, King Banyan Deer and the Branch Deer respectively. They lived in the forest which is outskirts of Banaras. Outside the forest there reigned a King who was fond of hunting and eating venison at every single meal. He even enforced his subjects on his hunting spree each and every day. The villagers got sick of this regular routine and they decided to build a deer park where the king could hunt without any help from his subject. One day the king's eyes fell on the two beautiful golden deer and he issued an order that these two deer should not be shot at any cost. Each day after that, either the King or one of his hunters would shoot arrow at the deer and killed in great numbers. One day King Banyan Deer and King Branch Deer came up with a plan to send one deer to be slaughtered in the royal palace. However, one day the Banyan deer stepped into the execution altar to



save a mother from being separated from her child. The King was highly impressed with this supreme sacrifice and he decided not only to spare his life but also agreed to spare the lives of all deer as well. He even vowed not to kill any animal, bird or fish. This folk tale illustrates how self-immolation can bring change in human outlook from violence to non-violence. This tale is also the teaching of ahimsa, doctrine of Buddhism when the king decided to release all the deer from the park. It is clear from this fable that hunting is practised in India down the ages not only to exhibit marksman skill or to sharpen sportsman skill but also for the intake of meat of certain animals based on the quality of the meat. According to Lodh, the Kshatriyas have the right to eat meat of certain animals like lion and tiger on certain occasions and the Mauryas hunt numerous animals and birds for the preparation of curries (192). The *Susrutha Samhita* composed around 5<sup>th</sup> century BC recommended a list of food items for a balanced diet which includes deer meat with rice and dhal (Amit 804).

To sum up, the narratives of hunting episode from these animation films shows the dichotomous relationship between the settled society and the wildlife animals in the past. The royal hunting expedition exemplifies a symbol of pride, valour, masculinity and luxury for kings in these films. However, subjugating the forest and the practice of hunting has brought an end to numerous wild species thereby affecting the ecological balance of the earth.

### Works Cited:

Amit. "Ancient Indian Food and Related Philosophies." *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*, vol. 5, Issue 5, May 2018, pp. 801-05.

*A History of Hunting in the Indian Subcontinent*. Last Wilderness Media Private Limited, April 2010. [thelastwilderness.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/History-of-Hunting-in-the-Indian-Subcontinent-Kavya-Chimalgi.pdf](http://thelastwilderness.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/History-of-Hunting-in-the-Indian-Subcontinent-Kavya-Chimalgi.pdf)

*A Hunt for Meaning: Hunting Scenes in India, 1700-1900*. Cleveland Museum of Art. [medium.com/cma-thinker/a-hunt-for-meaning-hunting-scenes-in-india-1700-1900-af6212d73f8f](https://medium.com/cma-thinker/a-hunt-for-meaning-hunting-scenes-in-india-1700-1900-af6212d73f8f)

Dandekar, R. N., editor. *The Mahabharata Revisited*. Sahitya Akademi, 2017. Reprint.

*Ek Anek Aur Ekta*. Created by Bhimsain, directed by Vijaya Mulay, Film

- Division of India, National Centre for Educational Technology, 1974. [youtu.be/bI376UnsUMg?si=H59zyRYsoTllzEvs](https://youtu.be/bI376UnsUMg?si=H59zyRYsoTllzEvs)
- Jataka Tales: Birth Stories of the Buddha*. Retold by Ethel Beswick, John Murray, 1956.
- Kantawala, S. G. "Genetic Episode of the Pandavas: Some Remarks." *The Mahabharata Revisited*. Ed. R. N. Dandekar. Sahitya Akademi, 2017.
- Lodh, Sayan. "Portrayal of Hunting in Environmental History of India." *Altralang Journal*, vol. 2, Issue 2, December 2020, pp. 190-206.
- Pandavas: The Five Warriors*. Directed by Usha Ganesh Rajah and Venkatesh Babu G, Pentamedia Graphics Limited, 2000. [youtu.be/21AcP5S1kYQ?si=ll2mthyIJ3aXWKcw](https://youtu.be/21AcP5S1kYQ?si=ll2mthyIJ3aXWKcw) Rajagopalachari, C. *Ramayana*. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 2013.
- Ramayana: The Legend of Prince Rama*. Directed by Yugo Sako, Nippon Ramayana Films, 1993. [youtu.be/gKcOjnDfzk?si=sSmFhlhndBzIH-2Cv](https://youtu.be/gKcOjnDfzk?si=sSmFhlhndBzIH-2Cv)
- Ray, Niladri Ranjan. "The Princely Hunt and Kshatriyahood." *Global Environment*, vol. 8. no. 2, 2015, pp. 446-72.
- Ray, Sudarshan. *Mahabharata: The Great Indian Epic*. Finger Print!, 2023.
- Robbins Paul. "Meat Matters: Cultural Politics along the Commodity Chain of India." *Ecumene*, vol. 6, no. 4, October 1999, pp. 399-423.
- Sharma, Vishnu. *Illustrated Tales of Panchatantra: The Doves and the Hunter*. Illustrated by G. S. Podder and S. Podder, Green Broccoli Books, 2012.
- Sinh, Anindita. "The Jataka Tales through the Lens of Existential and Buddhist Ethics." *Confluence, Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, vol. iv, 2020.
- Sinha, Kanad. "The Hunter, The Hunted and The Hunt: Reading the Royal Hunting Episodes in The *Mahabharata*." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 77, 2016, pp. 41-44.
- Subhash, Kak. *The Asvamedha: The Rite and its Logic*. Motilal Banarsidass, 2002.
- The Banyan Deer*. Directed by Ahmed Lateef, Shanti Varma, G. H. Saraiya, Films Division of India, 1957. [youtu.be/cCMIodzJTNO?si=mR6t-NteTtrRfKmr2](https://youtu.be/cCMIodzJTNO?si=mR6t-NteTtrRfKmr2)
- Velmurugan, M. "Historical Development of Wildlife Protection in India." *International Journal of Current Research and Modern Education*, vol. 2, Issue 2, 2017.