

Exotic Aliens: The Lion & the Cheetah in India. Valmik Thapar, Romila Thapar and Yusuf Ansari. Aleph Book Company, 161, B-4, Ground Floor, Gulmohar House, Yusuf Sarai Community Centre, New Delhi. 2013. 304 pp. Price: Rs 595.

The title and topic of the book under review challenge existing and almost taken for granted information about the origin of the Asiatic lion and cheetah in India. It is a book that provokes at first sight, evokes curiosity but leaves the reader dissatisfied at the end.

Tracing the origin of a species (here we mean nativity) can be done through historical accounts, archaeological and fossil evidences and also with the aid of genetic tools. This book attempts to trace the nativity of the Asiatic lions based on historical evidences. As the lead author, Valmik Thapar has authored four out of seven chapters and also introduces the topic and concludes in the Prologue and Epilogue respectively. Scholar and historian Romila Thapar has authored one chapter, while Yusuf Ansari has written two.

What exactly are the authors looking for in the pages of history, in ancient civilizations and culture? They are searching for earliest known evidences of lions and cheetahs from accounts of forests and natural systems; indication of presence and earliest depictions as a symbol in religion, culture and royalty as also evidences of trade and import of these animals into the country. This involves examination of paintings, historical structures, religious texts, documentation by learned travellers, scholars and biographies maintained by royal courts. Who better to do it than Romila Thapar? She gives a good account of available

historical records and proves her command over Indian history, but fails in giving us a decided point of view on the origin of the lion. She opines that 'the question of the lion being indigenous therefore still requires investigation'. From what she describes, the evidences with regard to the cheetah are even more baffling.

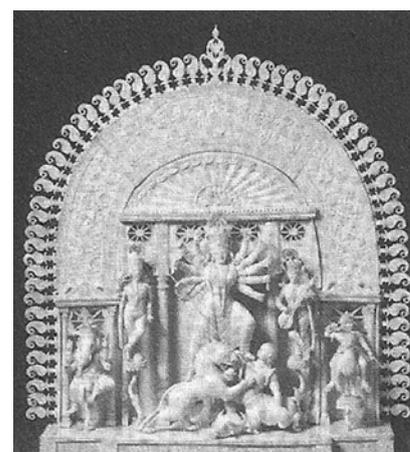
Yusuf Ansari provides a crisp and well-written account of the importance of lion and cheetah in the times of the Indo-Islamic rulers as an 'esoteric symbol of royal prestige' largely bred and maintained in 'shikargarhs'. But then, do these interesting accounts get us anywhere close to answering our primary question? There is yet no clue as to whether these animals were exotic or indigenous. He does give a weak conclusion that 'Delhi's sultans and the Mughals after them inadvertently embedded these exotic aliens into India'. In tracing the origin and distribution of lion and cheetah in India, to have to sift through a well-documented period of Indian history from relatively recent times does not throw light on the actual period of interest. Perhaps his contribution would be well appreciated in a book with a different title.

At the very beginning Valmik Thapar begs to be proved wrong. One would be almost tempted to do so, drawing arguments from an enormous body of literature, particularly scientific literature. But given that Thapar himself provides limp arguments, there is little need to do so. Even if his claims were indeed true, he does not present anything substantial in way of evidence or argument. That the Mughals were passionate hunters who used cheetahs to help them to hunt, or even that the British equally enjoyed the sport of hunting is by now commonplace knowledge. There could be no dearth of hunting records or photographs of 'shikars' and 'shikaris', but beyond a point they do not add to our knowledge. The chapter titled 'Age of slaughter' is entirely unnecessary and irrelevant to the premise of the book but few additional facts about lions and their historical presence in India. If not for the strong challenging claim of the book, it would almost be boring to have to read through repetitive information published elsewhere. Especially so, since the historical distributions, depiction and symbolism of Asiatic lions have been most elegantly discussed by Divyabhanusinh in his well-

researched book *The Story of Asia's Lions*.

Thapar dismisses the Asiatic lion population as 'large dogs' from a single trip to Gir and also selectively chooses literature and passages that would suit his argument, or perhaps it is so because he has limited his reading to what was available in his basement library. He does not bother to substantiate his statements with even basic available scientific literature. This is required when claims like 'the Indian lion and cheetah are not distinctive sub species but are exotic aliens that live (lived) in the land of tiger'. He would know that the nativity and divergence of *leo persica* are two different subjects and cannot be dealt with mere anthropological artefacts. The divergence as sub-species is a matter that is outside the scope of this book. 'I cannot imagine them (lions) feasting as a pride on cinkara or blackbuck. Maybe Nilgai could have been suitable prey for the lion....' He claims that tigers 'like' water and lions 'hate' water and that 'Tiger is the more powerful predator'. There are many such instances in the book where Thapar resorts to 'I feel' or 'in my opinion', and rather sounds like a child claiming the superiority of its favourite superhero.

No doubt, the magnitude of research and knowledge shared through this book is creditable. Where this book fails is not in its approach but flawed inferences where no conclusion can be drawn.



Goddess Durga is shown standing on her steed, the lion, in this nineteenth-century representation, which is similar to the depiction of Goddess Ishtar 2,500 years ago. Did different cultures evoke such imagery or did such themes migrate across the world?

BOOK REVIEWS

Although there are many absorbing details, facts are loosely presented even within the chapters without either continuity or sequence to argument. Unfortunately, even in the epilogue there is no attempt to string the chapters into a meaningful summary based on arguments put forth, but is rather a reiteration of what comes across as a stubborn notion of the primary author which is stated at the very beginning of the book. Contradictory statements are made by the authors. For instance, while Romila Thapar claims that there is no clear-cut evidence of transport of lions to or from India, Valmik Thapar seems to take this for granted and discusses how he is sure that 'the lion was imported into the country in large numbers and bred for release into hunting grounds of Indian royals'. He also rules out dispersal by land saying there is no evidence of *leo perscia* in Afghanistan and Baluchistan, regions bordering India, leaving the only option of import through sea route.

Of great interest to me, as a lion researcher is the discussion on lions – It is known that there appears to be no representation of lions in ancient rock art, fossils and paintings in ancient times. Particularly intriguing is its absence among fossils and seals unearthed from Harappa, one of the earliest known ancient civilizations of India and geographically close to present lion range. Later references to lions such as in the *Rig Veda*, in Sanskrit and Prakrit texts, in epics like the *Mahabharatha* and in verses of ancient poetry occur from the Vedic Period onwards. Lions were not only emblematic of royalty, but also became important religious symbols around this time. They gained further prominence under the Mauryan rule, particularly in the times of Ashoka Maurya. The practice of maintaining royal hunting parks and menageries contributed to the survival of lions through the centuries. Such a custom reached its pinnacle from around the 12th century under the Islamic rulers, especially under the Mughals. The documentation and evidences from this time, particularly in royal biographies are exhaustive, but no tangible insight on whether lions (and cheetahs) were native to India exists. From here on, we have good records of the distribution, decline and ultimate isolation of lions in Saurashtra region.

The interpretation of these historical imprints in the book is objectionable.

Valmik Thapar conveniently interprets these as being represented by exotic animals in royal hunting parks and dismisses much of the evidence (seals, stone structures, literature) as 'royal symbolism' and what Yusuf Ansari calls 'cultural omnipresence'. Wherever it came from, whether through land or sea, whether solely maintained in hunting parks or not, the divergence of the subspecies *leo persica* occurred much before the above-mentioned historical events and it is from this point that we have to trace the nativity of the Indian lion. Considerable scientific literature is already available on historical distributions, origin and evolutionary history of *Panthera leo*. These works are largely limited to phylogenetics and evolution of lions in Africa; the Asiatic lion forms but a part of the discussion. Without more detailed scientific investigations, it would be difficult to piece these evidences into facts that unravel the origin of Asiatic lions.

Much as I would hate to sound clichéd, it seems like Thapar's prejudice is India's pride. The pride comes from having living specimens of an incredible species which was most widespread with a historical range covering much of Africa, Eurasia, North America and tropical South America that could help us construct a fascinating account of evolutionary history. While this book itself cannot be taken seriously, it will hopefully spur anthropologists and scientists to dig deeper and give us a more credible account of the origin of lions in India.

MEENA VENKATARAMAN

701/B, Vesta Lodha Complex,
Maharashtra 400 601, India
e-mail: meena.venktraman@gmail.com



The Failure of Environmental Education (and How We Can Fix It). Charles Saylan and Daniel T. Blumstein. University of California Press Ltd, London, England. 2011. 241 pp. Price: Rs 1740.

All organisms have direct/indirect linkages with their local environment through air, food, shelter, etc. and increasing and varied anthropogenic pressures might distort these natural linkages. One would recall a school chapter on environment that dealt with human and other activities happening around a pond ecosystem. If lucky, it is likely that towards the end of that session, the teacher takes the students out to a water body, which for a youngster in the early years of schooling would be enticing, interesting and thought-provoking. Such activities nurture curiosity among the young ones. However, today's young generation is rarely fortunate to have this kind of natural exposure, because many a tanks in recent years have gone dry, or the curricular engagements of children tie them down. Moreover, global warming and other unmindful actions by the citizens have spoiled such ecosystems, especially in the cities and other urbanizing agglomerations, and several ill-conceived programmes for the youngsters have deprived them of the time for such quality activities. While as children we appreciate nature, as we grow up we become renormalized conforming progressively to the norms and restraints of the society, economy and polity. These extremes in the views and deeds require to be addressed urgently, especially since the utility of the current paradigm of environmental education has remained a question in terms of cultivating the appropriate mental make-up to address vital environmental issues.

The book under review talks about the linkages between anthropogenic impacts