

The Falconry in the Princely State of Bhavnagar

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The history of falconry is interesting. Many authors have given their views regarding the royal game. Falconry is the art of using raptors like falcons or hawks for hunting. There is evidence to show that falconry was practiced as far back as the eighth century B.C. in Assyria (modern-day Iraq and Turkey). It reached a peak in popularity in Europe during the Middle Ages. One of the main participants in falconry was Frederick II (1194-1250), a king of Germany and Sicily crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 1220. Frederick found time to be a passionate falconer and bird observer while being one of the most influential individuals in central Europe. He authored a book on falconry titled *De Arte Venandi cum Avibus* (On the art of

hunting with birds). In contrast to other academic works, this book was unique in that it was based on the author's observations.

It has long been recognized that the sport of falconry or hawking is the most popular. Popularity and undisputed supremacy as an aristocratic pastime during the Middle Ages in Western Europe. The origin of falconry, both geographically and chronologically, is still hidden in darkness, and it seems doubtful whether we shall ever discover the cradle of this ancient sport but as all the earliest pictorial and most of the earliest literary evidence comes to us from the Orient, it seems certain that either the Near, Middle or Far East first saw proud birds of prey serve the purposes of men. The first great civilizations of the world rose in the East, and hawking is the product of an advanced civilization. Falcons cannot be bred in captivity, and thus each bird presents a new and ever-varying experiment in trapping and training. Only a wealth of leisure, great patience, sensitivity, and ingenuity, not ordinarily shown with regard to animals by primitive people, will make a successful falconer. Besides, the wide-open steppes and plains, the endless deserts and bare mountain slopes of the East seem infinitely more suitable for falconry than the marshy and densely wooded regions of ancient Europe. Thus, it was that in the 12th and subsequent centuries and to such an immortal of falconry as Frederick II, the fullest technical knowledge of the sport was transmitted from the East and through the channels of Islamic civilization. (Hans J. Epstein 1943).

The art and practice of falconry has been described in many treatises in different languages but very few people know anything about it. There has always been considerable controversy regarding its origin, though there is Historical evidence that

it has been in existence since c. 1200 B.C. Falconry probably originated in Central Asia from where it spread to Persia and India. The Arabs learned it from the Persians, and it was brought to Europe by the returning Crusaders, who undoubtedly learned the art from the Arabs (Osman 1967).

Though literature regarding falconry in India is scanty, looking at the history of falconry in India, during the Mughal period, emperor Shah Jahan was the champion of the magnificent kingly sport of falconry, but first seen at its height in the days of the emperors Genghis Khan and Kublai Khan, the great Mongols and of monarchs of Persia, was introduced to India (Dharmakumarsinhji 1998).

Falconry became popular during the British era when several Indian Princely States engaged in it and kept hereditary falconers, some of whom had exceptional talent. 'Bazdar' Makekhan Fatekhan who served as a hereditary falconer to the Maharajahs of Bhavnagar was a falconer of very high caliber. One of his achievements was training the saker falcon (Cherrug) on the chinkara! This

is considered one of the highest standards to be reached in Indian falconry. Dharmakumarsinhji (1998) writes there were a few Indian states have falconry departments like Bhavnagar, Baroda, and Jamnagar, etc in Gujarat, and a few states in Rajasthan like Bharatpur, Jodhpur, Bikaner etc, Mysore, Hyderabad, and a few others in India. Many Muslim rulers of small princely states and Jagirdars also had good falconers with them and some of them used to organize falconry meetings in the pre-independence era of India.

The writings of KS Dharmakumarsinhji and Gohil Gambhirsinh (2020) revealed that H. H. Maharaja Bhavsinhji II (1875-1919) employed ustad Makkekhan the falconer to the Bhavnagar State as he was a keen shikari of that era but falconry was systematically developed in the time of H. H. Maharaja Krishnakumarsinhji(1919-1947). Almost from 1930 to 1955 the sport of falconry was at its highest peak in Bhavnagar. H. H. Maharaja Krishnakumarsinhji of Bhavnagar has given the responsibility of the falconry department



of Bhavnagar State to K. S. Dharmakumarsinhji the younger brother of the Maharaja. Dharmakumarsinhji was an excellent hunter and a master in falconry. Many experiments of hawking chinkara, migratory cranes, and even Saras crane were hunted with the help of trained falcons by the excellent falconers of Bhavnagar.

The interesting thing is, the falcons for hunting were either purchased or trapped by the local shikaris normally during winter, which was the main hunting season. The eyelids of trapped wild falcons were stitched initially by the well-trained falconers to make them habituated to human touch and keep their fear away. As well as the falcons should be made acquainted with the hood on their head which conceal their eyes. The vigorous training commenced immediately within a week or two. The trapped falcons were trained on artificial birds made of cotton and the wing feathers of crows known as Dalbo. The instinct of killing is properly focused and channelized for a particular quarry which may be francolin, ibis, cranes, or even gazelle. At the end of the hunting season, the falcons were rehabilitated in their habitat.

Some of the events are noteworthy for the readers as it shows the finest caliber of the falconers of Bhavnagar.

Hunting of Chinkara with Falcon: With the order of Maharaja, Bazdar Makekhan and his son Gulam Hussain purchased six juvenile and subadult Saker falcons from the famous hawk market of Amritsar (Punjab), at the highest cost in the auction. The large-sized Sakers were known amongst falconers as Harani Cherug, which means the falcons which used to hunt antelopes! The sakers are fast falcons, the size of ravens, and since the chinkara had to be put on the run before releasing the falcons. Before releasing, the falcons are unhooded and the pair released one after another. The gazelle realized it was being attacked when the falcon stooped down and hit its nape, and it started racing quickly. The

Shikar party remains ready either on horseback or in cars to pursue the event. The shikaris also keep trained dogs to catch the gazelle when the animal is properly attacked by the falcon. When the entire shikar was successful the Bazdars were given a prize by the Maharaja.

K. S. Dharmakumarsinhji was a renowned austringer (a person who is a master in training Goshawk) of princely India. During the 1940s, two American falconers, Frank and John Craighead the twin brothers and well-known conservationists of the 20th century, visited Bhavnagar to learn technics of falconry from Dharmakumarsinhji. They spent almost a year in Bhavnagar with the royal family and learned many new technics from Dharmakumarsinhji and documented the events for National Geography Magazine. Afterwards, at the beginning of the 1950s, they published a book and a documentary film on falconry, hunting with trained cheetah, and a few ceremonies of the royal family of Bhavnagar in the National Geography Magazine entitled 'Life with an Indian Prince'.

Another event is hunting with a trained peregrine falcon: Gulam Hussain the Bazdar, elder son of the great Bazdar Makekhan, a very talented falconer has purchased half a dozen peregrine from Masulipatnam (a part of Madras State) hawk market. He trained two of them to catch common and demoiselle cranes! The word used by the falconers for the different stages of their age is chooj for juvenile bozam for subadult and Tarinag for a bird about to become an adult. Chooj and Bozam stages were considered to be best and female falcons were considered better for crane hawking owing to their size and strength. A trained peregrine can successfully catch a common or demoiselle crane or even a Saras crane which is almost six times larger and much stronger. The trained falcon clung to the neck of a crane and the crane come down to the ground the shikaris were ready to catch the quarry and pick up the falcon safely. The crane may create a fatal attack on the falcon if it fails to

cling properly. Gulam Hussain was well rewarded at the closing of the hawking season every year.

There are many such events of hawking hares, lapwings, ibis, francolin, etc with goshawk or Laggar falcon. A trained goshawk used one foot on the neck of the hare and the other to keep hold of the fluttering feet of the quarry with its powerful talons. Such spectacular events were observed by the members of the royal family and the guests, either riding in a car or on horseback.

Hunting with an Eagle: In the Mughal Empire, eagles were trained but they were not as popular as hawks and falcons. The adult Bonelli's eagle (*Aquila fasciata*) is not very large but it excels in courage and footwork. The female is slightly larger than the male. Dharmakumarsinhji has trained a pair of Bonelli's eagles and successfully hunted Blackbuck! He describes that "Training eagles are exasperating work owing to their recalcitrant nature, their heavy weight and capacity to fast for days at a time. But once trained the eagle shows remarkable performance. To give one example, I let loose an immature female Bonelli's eagle on a blackbuck and the eagle overturned it by a hold of her talons on the muzzle with one foot and as the antelope came crashing down and tried to kick the eagle with its powerful hind legs and sharp hoofs the second foot was swiftly and dexterously used in which both hind legs, and one foreleg at the hocks were caught and bound as in a vice in the talon. The blackbuck, to my utter amazement, lay on the ground as if its legs had been tied. This revelation of the gripping powers and dexterity of Bonelli's eagle was beyond my imagination and reminded me of a hawk I had, a female goshawk, catching a hare using her feet alternately to her advantage to overpower the much heavier prey and then lying on her back with the hare on top, thus saving her tail feathers from being broken.

Falconry was a great art that has vanished since the 1970s along with the implementation of wildlife and forest laws in India. The Wildlife Protection Act 1972 is one of the most comprehensive acts in the

world. It provides legal protection to all species that are needed. The unauthorized trapping of birds is always harmful to the conservation of species. Hence for the conservation purpose the art of falconry is not permitted in India. But it still exists in some Arab countries, Japan, America, and Europe. North American Falconers Association was founded in 1961 to encourage the proper practice of the sport of falconry and the wise use and conservation of birds of prey. From a handful of members in its early years, NAFA has grown to a membership today of approximately 2,000 and is today the largest membership falconry organization in the world. The International Association for Falconry and Conservation of Birds of Prey is an international organization working from Belgium. The royal family and the legendary falconers of Bhavnagar will always be remembered in the history of falconry in India

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