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Change and Conservation

BISHNOI
AND ANTELOPE

Robert L. Fleming Jr.

February 2010

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A NOTE ON THE BISHNOI AND ANTELOPE IN INDIA

Robert L. Fleming, Jr.
Future Generations Graduate School
future.org

On a peaceful February morning, five wild Nilgai, India's largest antelope, browsed placidly inside the red sandstone fence of the Khejarli (Khejadli) Grove while Large Gray Babblers, their low contact notes holding the flock together, searched for termites in the shade of nearby *Prosopis cineraria*, khejri trees. And all the while, a caretaker, a man with a white turban and a splendid black moustache, explained the history and significance of this sacred shrine.



A Large Gray Babbler, *Turdoides malcolmi*, in a *Prosopis cineraria* tree in the Khejarli Grove.

The Khejarli area was far from peaceful on a morning in 1730 when a military crew from the nearby durbar of Abhay Singh, the Maharaja of Jodhpur in the Marwar region of Rajasthan, arrived to fell trees, the wood needed for the construction of a new palace. The local Bishnoi living in Khejarli, tried to talk the maharaja's men out of logging but when talk came to no avail, the villagers vowed to die rather than let a single tree be felled. In the ensuing engagement, one that is vividly recalled today,

some 360 people including women and men, both young and old, were cut to pieces as they hugged trees and otherwise threw themselves in front of the armed force. Shortly after the incident, the Maharaja learning of the massacre, issued an apology and decreed that henceforth there would be no tree-cutting or animal hunting in Bishnoi territory. For nearly 300 years, now, the Khejarli Grove has remained a peaceful shrine dedicated to the bravery of the Bishnoi.



The 1770 slaughter at the Khejarli Grove complete with names of some martyrs.

As a zoologist-naturalist I was in western India with two friends in February 2005 to visit with the colorful Rajasthani people and look at their wildlife.

The Bishnoi (Vishnoi), founded in the late 1400s, has evolved into one of India's widely respected groups, a sect that adheres to a set of twenty-nine principles [some references say twenty] now placed within a religious framework. The Bishnoi code promotes living in harmony with others and with their environment. Four of their edicts relate directly to man's relationship with animals or plants, while twenty-two deal with human activity and interactions with the environment (health, farming, and animal husbandry). Compassion is such a strong element that it is listed twice: once

for humans and again for animals. There are minor variations in this list but these do not affect the underlying the philosophy [see the Bishnoi website for a detailed inventory].



Wearing a distinctive nose ring of gold is characteristic of some older Bishnoi women.

The Bishnoi are best known for their protection of trees and antelope, the precept arising from *ahimsa*, the non-taking-of-life that is fundamental to Hinduism,

Buddhism and Jainism. In addition to protecting large plants and mammals, Bishnoi are admonished to strain water and other liquids through a fine cloth prior to drinking; this prevents accidental ingestion. Another tenant recommends that dung cakes or logs be shaken before being added to a fire as this helps remove beetles and other creatures.



Anklets are a common feature in much of India, including among the Bishnoi.

Jambho Ji (Jhambeshwar), the founder of the religion, was a follower of Vishnu and a man with extraordinary vision. He suggested, for example, that Bishnois should not wear blue clothing. In the past a rich, blue dye was produced from indigo bushes (*Indigofera tinctoria*), a species indigenous to this part of India. Apparently far too many shrubs were being destroyed to obtain the dye and in an effort to protect the vegetation, he suggested a ban on using blue cloth. This restriction, however, is little regarded today, as current blue dyes are not from the indigo bush.

Bishnoi are scattered over much of north and central India but are best known from communities in Rajasthan where some, like those around Jodhpur, live in near-desert terrain where rainfall averages some 30cm/11.80in a year. The folks here have adapted to this environment and live close to the land, farming and herding animals. Their diet often include a *chapatti*, a flat bread made from locally grown millet flour, that is eaten with a vegetable curry of cultivated greens sometimes infused with wild plants. The latter may include *sangari*, a small, dried bean of the *khejri* tree and the seedpods of the *khair*, an *acacia*. Bishnoi diets also include yogurt along with other

cow and goat milk products. In some Bishnoi areas opium poppies have been cultivated for centuries, and a few residents may still enjoy a little after-dinner opium-and-water drink while others frown on consuming both opium and alcohol.

An outstanding feature of traditional India, still widely seen in many areas, is the close association of humans with wildlife, even when the latter damages standing crops. One thinks of the Indian Wild Ass in cotton fields of Gujarat, the Nilgai in sorghum fields between Agra and Jaipur, and wild peafowl all over the north. But nowhere is this tolerance more impressive than in the relationship between the Bishnoi and the antelope of Rajasthan.

One afternoon, while sitting in the shade of an acacia at edge of Satpai village and enjoying the hospitality of the local Bishnoi, we glanced over an adjoining field to see four dun-colored animals, apparently thin-legged goats, grazing on stubble beside a clump of *Caliotropis* milkweed. On closer examination, these animals turned into Indian Gazelle, *Gazella bennettii*, popularly known as Chinkara, a small antelope closely related to species in West Asia, North Africa, and down the Atlantic coast to Senegal [see Wilson and Reeder, pp. 396-397]. Chinkara are resilient animals



A male Chinkara near Jodhpur.

that obtain some moisture from plants and dew so they can survive for long periods without drinking and thus do well in both semi-desert terrain and in dry, open forest.

To find these antelope grazing at the edge of the village spoke not only of the Bishnoi tolerance for life but also of a wider connection: the link between the flora and fauna of western India and Africa. This affinity exists, in part, because of semi-desert ecological niches that extend from western India across the Arabian Peninsula into Africa as far south as Kenya. Thus the Golden Jackal, *Canis aureus*, and the Striped Hyena, *Hyaena hyaena*, are heard at night in both India and northern Kenya. In addition, we think of lions and cheetahs. At the genus and family levels this Africa-India connection extends into forest and damp habitats where on both continents we see various bee-eaters, rollers, sunbirds, hornbills, *Pycnonotus* bulbuls, and *Turdoides* babblers, among others.



A mature male Blackbuck is considered one of India's most handsome ungulates. This animal is in Bishnoi territory with an exotic mesquite, *Prosopis*, in the background

There are differences between the two areas, though, and the plains of India harbor only four species of antelope while Africa hosts nearly eighty. Besides the usually shy Chinkara - the species we saw at the edge of Satpai village - India is home to the magnificent Blackbuck, *Antelope cervicapra*, another species that draws protection

from the Bishnoi. The older males of his striking animal are stunningly black-and-white with long, spiraling horns that may reach a length of over 65cm/25in [see Prater, p. 270]. This may well be one the most handsome of India's hoofed animals. Blackbuck, sacred to many Hindu adherents, draw the vehicle on which Chandra the moon god rides and are symbols of purity and peace.

In times past, this antelope often gathered in huge herds, spreading far over the flat plains as they grazed on grasses and low herbs. Traditionally, Blackbuck faced little danger in these open areas for with a speed of nearly 100km/60mi per hour they could outrun everything. Everything, this is, except cheetahs. Not only is a fleeing Blackbuck fast, but individuals may also suddenly leap two or more meters into the air, presumably to get a better look at nearby danger, a behavior reminiscent of the African impala.

These antelope, while among of the fastest mammals on earth, were still a favorite target of the Asian Cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*), a cat which used both surprise and a blinding, short-distance dash that could reach 110kph/70mph to catch them. A form of entertainment among Asian elite of the past was to hunt with cheetahs. The great



A painting of a royal hunt on the Deccan Plateau

Mogul Emperor Akbar (late 1500s), for example, is said to have kept a thousand hunting cheetahs in his stables. Hunting with cheetah as a “sport” continued in India into the early 1900s but when blackbuck populations dwindled, cheetah population crashed until the last wild animals in India were reported in 1947 (when three young males, probably litter mates, were shot at night from a jeep by the Durbar of Korea, a state in central India [see Van Ingen, 1948]. While cheetahs have disappeared from India, blackbuck still occur regularly in Bishnoi territory around Jodhpur with other populations stabilizing in sanctuaries such the Blackbuck National Park in Velvadar in Gujarat.

The Nilgai, *Boselaphus tragocamelus*, one of the other two low-elevation antelope of India also benefit from Bishnoi precepts. This large antelope, considered one of the remnants of a group of hoofed animals that possibly gave rise to domestic cattle [see Menon p. 46], sometimes parades through Bishnoi territory as if on show. The largest males range up to 250kg/550lbs, the size of a small horse, and this places

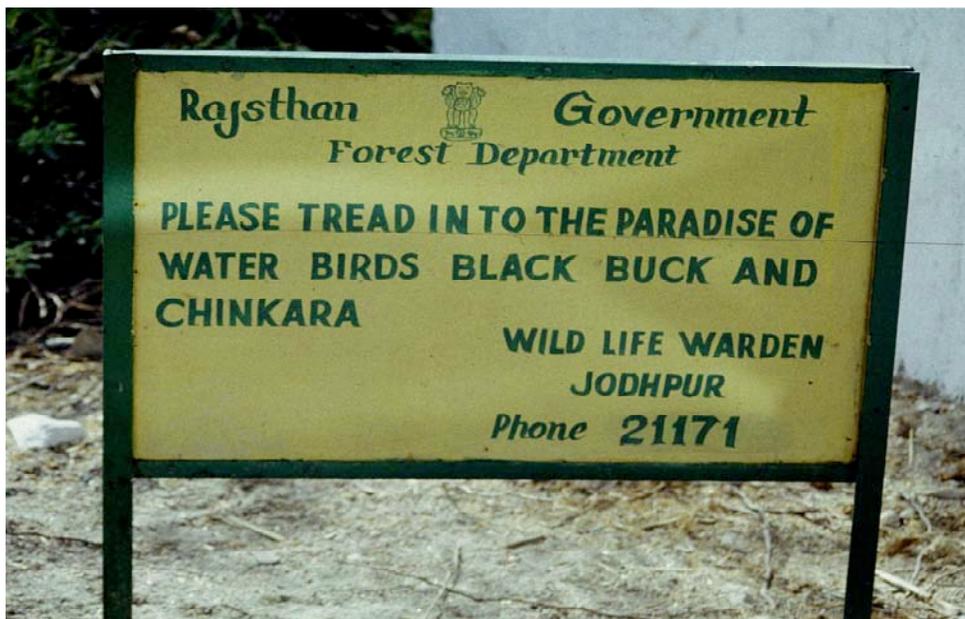


**A male Nilgai in the Ranthambore Nat Park, Rajasthan in dry April conditions.
Photograph with thanks from Britt Thal.**

them among the ten largest antelope in the world. These older males are attired in a rich gray that hardly blends with the tall grasses and dry brush in which they roam and this size and color surely limits their populations. However females and young are beautifully beige-colored so often escape detection as they merge with the vegetation. It should be noted that the desiccated-looking landscape of much Nilgai terrain dramatically changes to green during the three-month summer monsoon period but even still the big males stand out.

Nilgai are seen in fields south of Delhi and between Agra and Jaipur and this speaks of a tolerance for animals that stretches far beyond Bishnoi country. However, a herd of large, wild animals munching through a wheat field near Agra focuses one's attention on the conservation issue of how to deal with crop damage done by wild herbivores. Should hunting be encouraged to keep the population in check? Or should authorities build fences or other travel restraints? Should there be compensation to farmers? Or, just perhaps, could communities organize this antelope-human association into a relationship that would be both economically beneficial and also satisfy religious traditions? In parts of Rajasthan, the Bishnoi have been much involved in these discussions.

Future Generations is an organization that promotes a process that combines development with conservation. Stress is laid on listening to community voices, building on their successes, using local energy and wisdom, and developing three-way partnerships that bolster efforts to arrive at long-term solutions. This suggests



An early effort to promote “antelope tourism” in Rajasthan.

the answer to the question of crop damage is likely multivaried, tailored to the needs of the local people, to the habitat requirements of each species, and to available support structures.

The Bishnoi are well known on the cultural tourism map of India and they publicize their traditions through a fine website [www.bisnoi.org]. But promoting an appreciation for the beauty and diversity of nature has not been fully accessed by the Bishnoi. However, by arranging close encounters with antelope and other wild creatures, local folks could enhance the charm of a visit to this remarkable part of India and thereby increase revenues. And in this way, the Bishnoi could become a good example of how a natural resource, managed by a community for its own economic purposes, can benefit all involved. As the Bishnoi global outreach expands, we wish them and their antelope well.

My thanks to Bob and Birgit Bateman who sponsored the 2006 visit with the Bishnoi and to Raj and Diane Singh, Ragavendra Rao, and staff of Exotic Journeys for their hospitality in New Delhi and for travel arrangements in India.

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