

Wajid Ali Shah

The Naturalist King

SHAKUNT PANDEY

The arrangement for keeping snakes in captivity had never been made anywhere before and Wajid Ali Shah was the first person to think of it.



WAJID Ali Shah, the last king of the erstwhile princely state of Awadh (Oudh), had an unparalleled love for birds and animals. He holds the credit for founding the first Zoological Gardens of British India's capital city Calcutta.

Wajid Ali Shah did not believe in keeping animals and birds behind iron cages. His Zoo in Matiaburj (Calcutta) was unique - it had open-air enclosures for different types of Deer, Rhinoceros, Giraffe, Bactrian Camel (two-humped camel), etc. Various species of aquatic birds and tortoises also lived in open air enclosures. He was one of the pioneers of open-air enclosures for animals and birds in zoological gardens in India.

Keeping the safety of the public in mind, only ferocious animals were kept in cages. He kept snakes in captivity in an open-air artificial pit, to avoid curtailing their movement or their hunting skills.

Wajid Ali Shah employed many expert animal keepers who not only took good care of the animals and birds but an effort in breeding animals, particularly breeding of various species of birds, was also undertaken. The zoo was kept in a spic-and-span condition thereby preventing any outbreak of diseases.

Before environmentalists began vouching for the importance of fish ponds, Wajid Ali Shah had created several fish ponds at strategic locations in his new kingdom at Matiaburj. The fish pond was well looked after and special keepers for fish were appointed (Long Live the King, *The Statesman Supplement*, 23 June 2000).

He was also aware of the dangers of river erosion and flooding of rivers. Keeping these factors in mind he had planned his new kingdom a safe distance from the Hoogly.

The British had always portrayed Wajid Ali Shah in a negative shade. Had it not been for Abdul Halim 'Sharar', the fascinating details of the zoo and the king's contribution to management of animals in captivity would have remained unknown. However, Wajid Ali Shah did not have the services of any expert zoologist to have recorded the description and varieties of birds and animals housed in his zoo and details of breeding attempts undertaken therein. Sharar was an expert writer, but sadly, he was not a zoologist.

Wajid Ali Shah gave an opportunity to people to see animals and birds at close quarters. This open-air zoo was definitely a step towards conservation of animals since only living animals create curiosity and interest in people. The last king of Awadh should be thanked for imparting this form of practical education to the public. For the first time in their lives, people came face-to-face with never before seen animals like Giraffes, Bactrian Camels, Silk-winged Pigeons, Ostriches, demoiselle Cranes and White Peacocks, to name a few .

Wajid Ali also made an attempt at scientific breeding of pigeons and was successful at breeding a variety of a green-coloured pigeon.

The English translation of Abdul Halim Sharar's classic work *Gujista Lucknow*, titled *Lucknow – the Last Phase of an*

Nurture the Trees

Oh! See those beautiful trees
They make us fall on our knees

See the moringas, peepals and neem
Stand in glory and compassion they seem

Laden with branches, leaves and fruits
They support a world beneath their roots

Always ready to help and support humanity
Pledging to do this till eternity

They provide clothing, food and shelter
To every individual on this earth no matter

They have stood through history by every person
In spite of caste, creed, colour and tradition

Birds nest on them, insects infest them
We rest under them, animals always trust them

They purify the air, they clean the environment
Yet we harm them in the name of development

We have been ruthless we have been cruel to them
They are the losers in the unlikely duel

Nurturing caring and growing more trees should be our
aim

So that the country gets back the lost fame
And we are no longer put to shame

Monika Koul

(Dr. Monika Koul is Assistant Professor, Department of Botany, Hans Raj College, University of Delhi-110007)

Oriental Culture, gives an interesting account of Wajid Ali Shah's zoo at Matiaburj. This is how the unique arrangement of keeping snakes in captivity is described: "The most amazing thing of all was a large, long and deep tank in front of Shahinshah Manzil. All four sides of the tank had been made very slippery and in the middle was an artificial hill, sloping downwards at the front and into which hundreds of pipes had been run, some of which were

Wajid Ali Shah employed many expert animal keepers who not only took good care of the animals and birds but an effort in breeding animals, particularly breeding of various species of birds, was also undertaken. The zoo was kept in a spic-and-span condition.

European travellers were amazed at the sight and would take pictures and write down details.

open at the top to act as fountains. Thousands of large snakes, six to nine feet long, had been released on this hill and would crawl about it. They would go to the top and then come down to the bottom to catch frogs which had been put there. Round the hill there was a moat where the snakes would swim and chase the frogs. It is unlikely that arrangement for keeping snakes in captivity had ever been made anywhere before and Wajid Ali Shah was the first person to think of it. European travellers were amazed at the sight and would take pictures and write down details."

Sharar describes the king's aviaries thus: "A large number of birds of various kinds were let loose in there and all possible arrangements were made for their upkeep and breeding."

After Wajid Ali Shah's death in 1887 his new empire at Matiaburj was auctioned off and turned to dust by the British. Wajid Ali Shah's zoo was also pulled down and many animals and birds were brought to the Calcutta Zoological Gardens. The first permanent superintendent of the Calcutta Zoological Gardens, Ram Brahma Sanyal, in his acclaimed work *Handbook of the Management of Animals in Captivity in lower Bengal* lists a pair of European variety of brown bears, an adult female Javan Rhinoceros, a Bactrian camel, a pair of the large cormorant and several Indian Rollers that were brought to the Calcutta Zoological Gardens from the zoo of the last king of Awadh. All these animals and birds had spent a considerable period in the zoo of the king and were in sound health which speaks volumes about the care of animals and birds in the zoo of Wajid Ali Shah.

In a pencil sketch housed at the Lucknow State Museum, the last King of Awadh is portrayed playing with his pet cat, dandling the long haired and collared animal on his lap – a clear deviation from the trend of Nawabs and kings having their portrait made of hunting down ferocious animals.

Sadly, the last king of Awadh's contribution to the history of the Zoological Gardens and science is rarely acknowledged. The aim of his zoo was not only exhibition of animals and birds but also the sound management of animals in captivity.

Mr Shakunt Pandey is a freelance journalist writing for various newspapers, magazines, and periodicals. Address: P 331 Parnasree Pally, Flat No.3A, 3rd Floor, Kolkata-700060; Email: shakuntpan33@gmail.com; shakunt_soumya@rediffmail.com