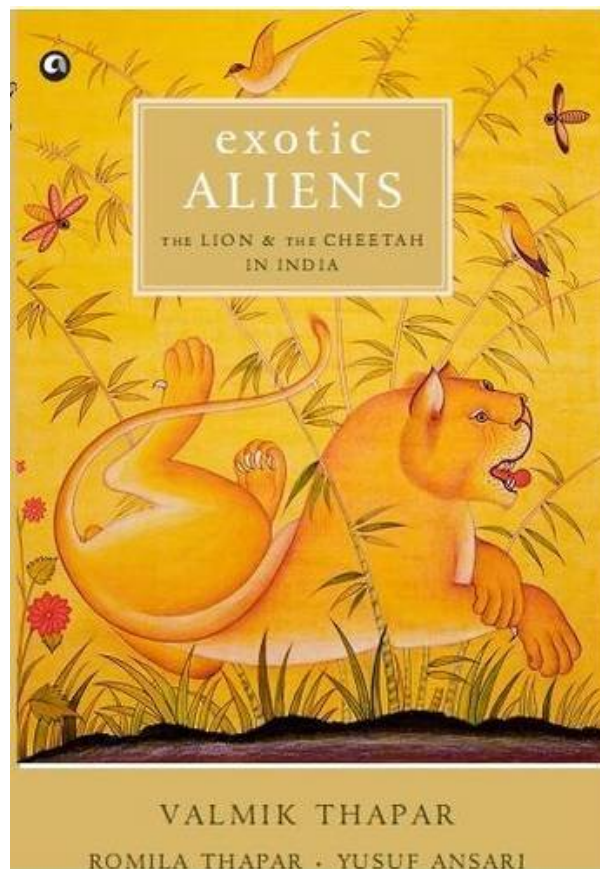
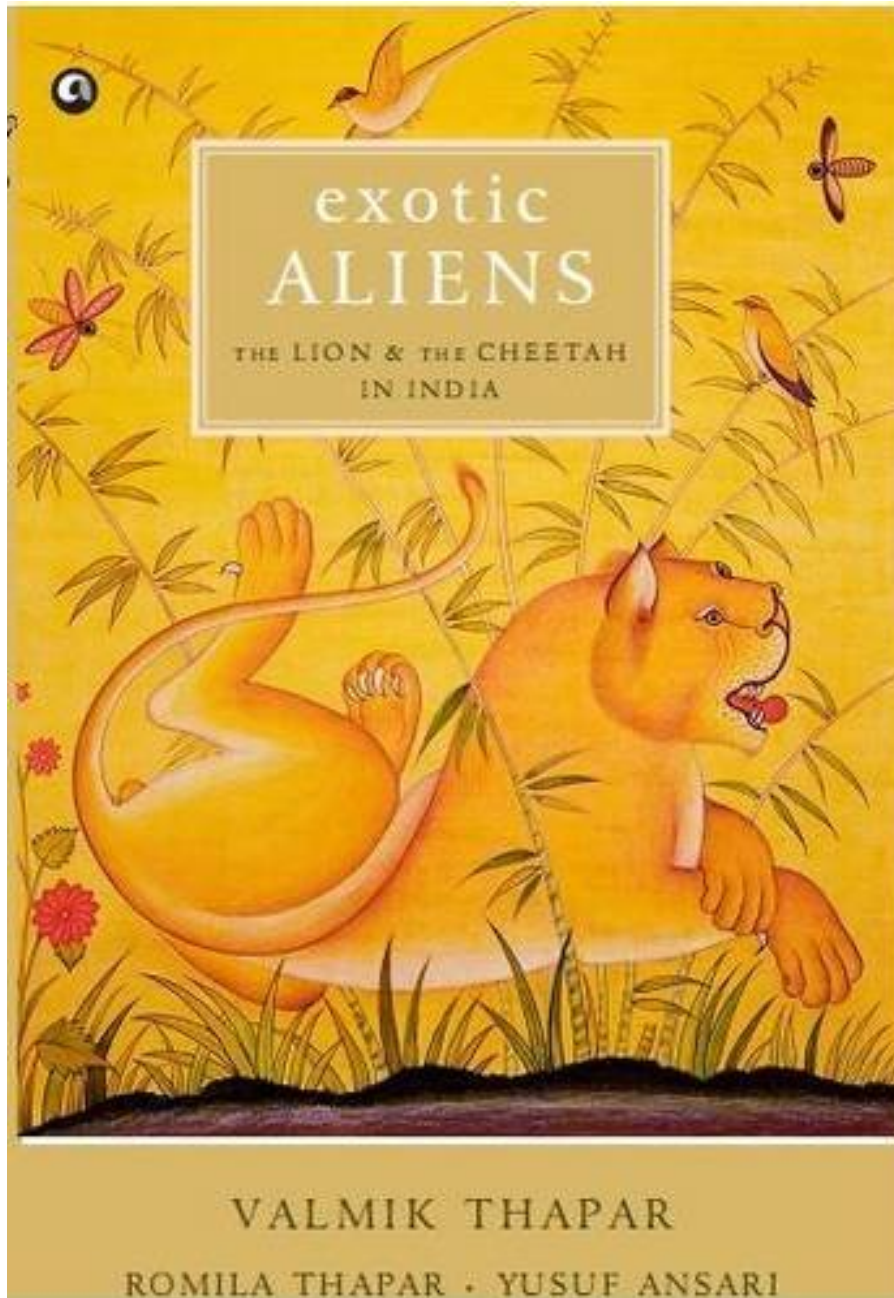


**EXOTIC ALIENS: THE LION AND THE CHEETAH
IN INDIA BY ROMILA THAPAR,
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About the Author

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EXOTIC ALIENS: THE LION AND THE CHEETAH IN INDIA

BY ROMILA THAPAR, VALMIK THAPAR PDF

In the sixteenth century, Dutch traveller Jan Linschoten noted the absence of lions throughout the Indian subcontinent. Two hundred years later, echoing similar comments made by various hunters and observers of Indian wildlife, the British shikari and writer, Captain Thomas Williamson, emphatically declared: There are no lions in Hindustan. Much the same was said about the cheetah in the region. These observations piqued the interest of well-known naturalist Valmik Thapar. After an enormous amount of research and study he now believes that, contrary to existing scientific theory, neither of these animals were indigenous to the Indian subcontinent. Remarking on the lack of accounts of encounters with these animals as opposed to the tiger and the leopard which are extensively documented as well as inconclusive genetic studies, he argues that, over the centuries, the lion and cheetah were brought into the country from Persia and Africa by royalty, either as tributes or to populate their hunting parks and menageries. Enlisting the help of renowned historian, Romila Thapar who analyzes historical accounts and representations of the lion in early India and scholar, Yusuf Ansari who looks back at the lives of the Mughals and their famed hunts to further validate his theory, Valmik Thapar concludes at the end of this thought-provoking book that the Indian lion and the Indian cheetah were, in fact, exotic imports, and not indigenous subspecies. Tracing the history of the lion and the cheetah for over 5,000 years, and substantiated with pictorial evidence, *Exotic Aliens* is a pioneering work that could turn field biology on its head.

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A mystery investigated

By Martina A. Nicolls

The tiger and the leopard are extensively documented in the Indian subcontinent, but what about the lion and the cheetah? *Exotic Aliens* explores the question – Although the lion and the cheetah were embedded in the art, culture and religions of India, are there any conclusions we can draw about the presence of these two animals on the ground through the historical record?

Thapar maintains that neither animal was indigenous to India. He introduces the theory that hunting parks, restricted forests, and royal zoos were the locations of these exotic animals. However, “references to hunting parks are not easily discernible in the early texts, but they seem to be obliquely mentioned in the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, a text on political economy” in the fourth century before the Christian era (BCE). The language of texts presented little clarification to the issue. For example, *sher* in Persian means lion, but in Urdu it means tiger. So did writers document lions when in fact they were tigers? Thapar indicates that the Mohenjodaro seals did not depict the lion, nor did early cave paintings, whereas the tiger was shown in picture form “everywhere.”

The likely source of lions introduced into India, Thapar says, “could have been Bakh/Bactrica” (in Turkmenistan), moving to Afghanistan and then into the southern part of the Hindu Kush and Pamirs. “Speaking impressionistically, it would seem that the lion arrived on the Indian landscape at the period when Mesopotamia, Iran, northwestern India and the Oxus Valley had close connections around the Achaemenid period” when Alexander the Great traversed the region.

Thapar suggests that “Indian royalty [and the British] continued to import, tame and release lions into their game parks from which some inevitably escaped.” Because they were tame, they were generally shot “with very little trouble.” “I believe that the lion was an irresistible and magical creature and an alien imposter in the land of the tiger” and “those who ruled the land kept the myth of the Indian lion alive for over 2,000 years.”

The cheetah, “commonly known as the Indian hunting leopard ... is neither a leopard nor is it particularly Indian.” People that had tamed the cheetah remarked that it was “dog-like in its docility.” Although “cheetahs across the world have so little genetic variation that the analysis of its subspecies is an issue that remains unresolved” Thapar believes they came to India as gifts and were imported by land and sea from Africa and Persia.

Moreover, in his argument that cheetahs are not indigenous to India, he states that “the Indian wilds were not suitable for the cheetahs” and that “the cheetahs could never have coexisted with the tiger in India as each would have required its own ecological niche”. It is only in the 12th century that “we begin to find mention and visual depiction of hunting leopards or cheetahs.” As with lions, the cheetahs, he believes, spread from palaces and hunting reserves to commonly being sold on the streets as exotic animals. He says, “at least 1,200-1,500 cheetahs could have been imported into India [possibly from Kenya] in the twentieth century to facilitate royal hunts.”

Thapar presents, at the end, 10 conclusions that “can be clearly stated” about the lion’s presence in India – and likewise, 10 conclusions about the cheetah’s presence. The author indicates that this book is not meant to be a scholarly thesis – although it reads like it. Thapar set out to “investigate a mystery” in which the more he read about the history of the lion and the cheetah, the more he pondered.

While sometimes dense, it is an interesting read with remarkable sketches, drawings, photographs, and

paintings.

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Questioning the prevailing wisdom...

By Tom Kogut

"Exotic Aliens" is a fascinating book that makes a strong case (but not an iron-clad one) that lions and cheetahs in India were originally imported from Africa for royal menageries and hunting parks and were never indigenous to the Indian subcontinent as has been generally assumed. If nothing else, the book clearly details the long and extensive trade in large mammals over a period of centuries from Africa to India, Nepal, China, etc., mainly for royal menageries and private hunting preserves. It also depicts the massive scale of the slaughter that occurred by both Indian royals and also the British, sometimes with extreme cruelty.

In the end, each reader will have to make up his or her mind about the exact status of both lions and cheetahs in India based on the evidence presented. This book will certainly result in a lot of discussion and debate in wildlife circles and compel those who believe that these two species are native to India to come up with some facts to support that assumption. At least part of this debate involves the use of limited conservation resources and funding to conserve non-native "Asiatic" lions, or re-introduce cheetahs, while native tigers continue to decline and become more critically endangered every year.

"Exotic Aliens" is a must read for those interested in the wildlife of India, as well as those with an interest in Indian history.

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