

Nature Watch

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The Quintessential Antelope – Life of the Blackbuck

R K Menon



R K Menon is a keen observer of animal behaviour. Fuelled by his deep interest in ethology, he studied blackbuck intensively for three years in the late seventies in Guindy National Park and Point Calimere, and followed it with years of continued observation. A founding member of the Madras Naturalist's Society, he has encouraged, guided, and helped a number of students and naturalists gain a footing in the field of animal behaviour research and conservation.

Although Africa has more species of antelope than India, the Indian blackbuck is the quintessential antelope. With its black-and-white coat and magnificent spirally twisted horns, the male blackbuck stands out in any collection of animals. The species boasts of a long and manifold cultural association with people. Yet, in many areas, blackbuck populations have declined. Today it is an endangered species that survives mostly in sanctuaries.

The Sun God rides in a chariot drawn by two prancing horses, but the chariot of the Moon God, Chandra, is drawn by a pair of antelopes, the blackbuck, *Antelope cervicapra*. This is possibly due to the white ring around the eye of the animal, which suggests the moon in the night sky. Indians have venerated this antelope from ancient times. To Lord Shiva, this buck was a sign of good omen and blackbuck horns joined together at the base, their sharp ends shod in iron, became the weapon of religious fakirs. In *Kim*, Rudyard Kipling describes such a fakir with a staff of blackbuck horns. The blackbuck has been known to Europeans since the time Alexander the Great invaded India around 326 BC and was presumably part of the animal trade. The animal has received protection in many areas of India due to its sacred associations.

In the days of Mughal emperor Jehangir, blackbuck fights were part of the entertainment in the Mughal court and the populace was given to betting on the fights. This appears strange at first, as the buck seems a docile and timid animal. Nevertheless, since the holding and defending of territories is an integral part of the life of male blackbuck, they will fight very seriously.

The Mughals also used to hunt blackbuck using the spectacular