

## The End of a Trail: The Cheetah in India

by Divyabhanusinh

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One evening late in 1947, the Maharajah of the State of Korea in central India spotted three cheetahs in his headlights. He picked up his rifle and shot them all – with two bullets. They were the last physical evidence of cheetahs in India, although a handful of sightings were reported into the 1950s. The Maharajah was proud of his exploit and asked for it to be recorded in the Bombay Natural History Society Journal. It was; but the Editors declared that they were “so nauseated by the account of this slaughter that their first impulse was to consign it to the waste-paper basket. Its publication here is intended in the nature of an impeachment.”

Three hundred years earlier the Moghul Emperor of India, Akbar, had a collection of 1,000 cheetahs, and his son, Jehangir, wrote that Akbar had owned 9,000 during his lifetime. They were used for hunting blackbuck antelopes and gazelles. It was the cheetah’s heyday, but Divyabhanusinh points out that the demand for cheetahs by the Moghul rulers took a heavy toll on the wild population. Hunting with cheetahs, on a less lavish scale, continued into the first part of the 20th century, but then often with imported African cheetahs.

Divyabhanusinh has devoted long years to research on the history of the cheetah in India. Starting with prehistoric cave paintings, where the cheetah was among many animals depicted, even bees and scorpions, he has gleaned references to cheetah-like animals in Sanskrit and Classical Greek and Roman literature. Early Muslim invaders, who established their rule in India, knew the cheetah from Persia. Accounts from the time of Muhammad Ghorī around 1200, mention the *yuz*, Persian for cheetah. A few

years later, references indicate that hunting with cheetahs was known to the invaders. But it was with the establishment of the Moghul dynasty in the 16th century that the cheetah became celebrated. Akbar was given a cheetah in 1555, when he was 13. He became passionately interested in hunting with cheetahs, and captured them himself in the wild.

Akbar’s son, Jahangir, was also an enthusiastic hunter with cheetahs, and a keen naturalist. He provided the first record of successful breeding by cheetahs in captivity: “It is an established fact that cheetahs in unaccustomed places do not pair off with a female, for my revered father once collected together 1,000 cheetahs. He was very desirous that they should pair, but this in no way came off. He had many times coupled male and female cheetahs together in the gardens, but there, too, it did not come off. At this time, a male cheetah, having slipped its collar, went to a female and paired with it, and after two and a half months three young ones were born and grew up. This has been recorded because it appeared strange.”

Divyabhanusinh notes that there are no other records of cheetahs breeding in captivity until African cheetahs had young in Philadelphia Zoo in 1956.

Illustrated manuals on catching, training, and caring for, cheetahs were produced in India. One produced by the Baroda Court in 1924 distinguished the Indian cheetah as having a black tip to its tail, compared with an African cheetah’s white tip. Cheetahs in 67 out of 89 Moghul period paintings have black tips. White tips appear in later illustrations, although recent photos of Iranian cheetahs examined by the author showed black tips. He concludes that most Indian cheetahs had predominantly black-tipped tails, with the possibility of a very small white or light yellow patch at the very end.

For hunting, trained cheetahs, collared and with their eyes hooded, were taken out on bullock carts. When close enough to a herd of antelope, the hood was removed, and the cheetah streaked off for a kill. It would be rewarded with a ladle of blood. The technique survived into the 20th century, when motor vehicles sometimes replaced the carts.

The British in India apparently had little interest in hunting with cheetahs, although there are some interesting accounts. But they did sometimes shoot them and spear them from horses.

With the coming of the 20th century, the Indian cheetah was very rare and Indian princes began to import African animals for coursing. Divyabhanusinh calculates that about 200 were imported between 1918 and 1945. But with the end of the Second World War, British withdrawal and the integration of the princely states into independent India the sport died out – as did the Indian cheetah.

Divyabhanusinh is one of many Indian wildlife enthusiasts who dream of reintroducing the cheetah; he reviews the options and concludes that it could be done if sufficient protection were provided. However, under existing laws only the government could undertake a project, and Divyabhanusinh doubts the existence of the political will. In fact, the then Director of the Wildlife Institute of India, H.S. Panwar, and the resident FAO wildlife expert, Alan Rodgers, declared in a review of protected areas: “There are no suitable areas to reintroduce cheetah into a ‘wild’ situation in this zone (Indian desert) or elsewhere in India. A viable ‘wild’ cheetah population of 50 animals would need some 400 km<sup>2</sup> of grassland/scrubland habitat with a relatively dense prey base (chinkara gazelle etc. ) and no domestic stock. Such areas no longer exist and so reintroduction on this scale is clearly not possible.”

Tables and appendices in this book provide extensive background information and data about the cheetah in India. Special mention must be made of the magnificent illustrations: cave drawings, Egyptian murals, Moghul paintings, drawings from cheetah books, and historical photos.

India lost the cheetah, but it remains the world’s richest country in wild cats, with 15 species still to be found there. Given the human pressure on India’s wild places, this is remarkable. But with the population rapidly approaching one billion and little sign of deceleration, one fears for the future.

Peter Jackson