

Chavda D. 1994. The Cheetah in India. Cat News:17.

Keywords: 4IN/Acinonyx jubatus/capture/cheetah/habitat/history/re-introduction/royal sport/ survival

Abstract: A search through prehistoric records, classical Greek, Latin, Sanskrit and Persian records has revealed many interesting aspects of the cheetah's brush with man in India. For nearly a thousand years cheetahs were systematically captured for royal sport, which depleted their numbers in their natural habitat and also made it difficult for their young ones to survive as the females were being captured too. No serious attempt to re-introduce the cheetah has been made in India so far. Re-introduction would be possible if there were political will to restore grasslands and protect the existing prey base prior to a such an attempt.

The Cheetah in India

by Divyabhanusinh Chavda*

A search through prehistoric records, classical Greek, Latin, Sanskrit and Persian records has revealed many interesting aspects of the cheetah's brush with man in India.

Nearly 2,000 years ago the Greek geographer Strabo referred to tame "pardalis" walking in royal processions in India, and the Roman Claudius Aelianus referred to tame "pantheras" being brought to their King by Indians, along with four-horned oryxes (four-horned antelopes). The references obviously are to dappled cats in both cases. Claudius Aelianus also refers to tame black "lions" being used in India for hunting game.

While the first two references were in all probability to cheetahs, the third reference must be wrong as lions have never been used for hunting game in India. With information of India received often through secondary sources by the ancient Greeks and Romans, it may be that Claudius Aelinus was in fact referring to cheetahs. However, these are only probable references and not certainties.

The Amarakosa, the earliest Sanskrit lexicon, believed to have been compiled between the 4th and 6th centuries A.D. gives different names of *Simha* (lion, here the word is used in a generic sense to denote cats) and it lists the various animals of this type as *pancanakha* (five clawed), among which is listed the *citraka*, from which comes the word cheetah. As there are no descriptions of the animals, a definite identification is difficult.

Manasollasa, the encyclopedic work of the 12th century by the Calukya King Someswara III, lists 30 different types of deer hunts, in addition to hunts with hounds, hawking and falconry and fishing. Of the various types of deer hunts one is *vyaghraya mrigaya*, which clearly records a King using *Citrakas* to hunt *Krsnasara* (blackbuck). This is the first Sanskrit record of hunting with cheetahs.

Among the Muslim records, the 13th century Tabaqat-i-Nasiri, gives a clear reference to *Yuz* (Persian for cheetah) being used for hunting. Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi, of the 14th century, records that Firoz Shah regularly hunted with *Yuz* and *siyagosh* (caracal).

The Mughal records are too well known to justify repetition here, apart from mentioning that cheetahs have been profusely recorded in literature, art, carpet design and so on. The Emperor Jahangir records seeing a white cheetah, the only such instance recorded, and he also notes the birth of three cubs at his court, which is the first recorded instance of cheetahs breeding in captivity anywhere. As is well known, Jahangir's father, Akbar, had 1,000 cheetahs in his menagerie at one time, and, during his rule of 50 years, he is reported to have collected 9,000 of them.

In 1808, 50 years after the Battle of Plassey (which led to British domination of India), the first work on sport in India was published by an English observer who mentions hunting with cheetahs. The British mainly hunted large mammals, such as tigers, elephants, gaur and rhino. As a rule, they did not appreciate the art of coursing with cheetahs.

Though they were numerous in the 18th century, cheetahs, which were found as far east as Orissa and south to Mysore, were becoming rarer in the 19th century and the last credible records of cheetah sightings were in the 1960s.

An analysis of British and subsequent records has revealed that about 125 cheetahs were shot/spared/encountered/definitely reported between 1799 and 1968.

British and princely records reveal that the cheetah, in the final phase of its existence in India, was found at the edges of jungles and not in its most preferred habitat. Among the causes of its extinction was the steady growth of human population from Mughal times and the consequent conversion of grasslands into agricultural lands, which were not the best habitat for the cheetah to hunt its prey. At the same time, the prey base of the cheetah was far narrower in India than in Africa, and it had to subsist on less preferred prey at the edge of the jungle.

For nearly a thousand years, and possibly more, cheetahs were systematically captured for royal sport, which depleted their numbers in their natural habitat and also made it difficult for their young ones to survive as the females were being captured too.

No serious attempt to reintroduce the cheetah has been made in India so far, but it would be possible to do so if there were political will to restore grasslands and protect the existing prey base in them prior to such a reintroduction attempt. Dr M.K. Ranjitsinh has suggested Khadir Bet in the Rann of Kutch as a suitable location for reintroduction, but no steps have been taken in that direction.

The contentious issue of subspecific differences of cheetahs from Africa and Asia has been examined on the basis of the limited available material on Asia's cheetahs. The study has shown very minor differentiation, which could be attributed to local environmental variation. One difference noted in India earlier (elsewhere later) was that a cheetah from India was more likely to have a predominantly black-tipped tail, whereas a cheetah from Africa was likely to have a predominantly white-tipped tail.

In India itself, regional variations in cheetahs were recorded by Persian and British sources. They state that the cheetah of the Deccan was smaller than the cheetah from Gujarat, which was considered to be larger and the best for coursing. One Persian source differentiates between cheetahs of the deserts (i.e. plains) and cheetahs of the hills, the former being lighter in colour, and better to hunt with, because the latter did not course effectively as it was not used to do so in the uneven terrain in the hills.

Because of a very long tradition in India of hunting with cheetahs, the various sources examined reveal that the method of trapping, training and hunting with cheetahs was developed into a fine art. In addition, over 30 different ailments of cheetahs were known, along with the treatment. By far the most interesting finding was that ways of breeding cheetahs in captivity were known to Indians, and one document details some of the procedures involved.

The earliest known instance of an African cheetah in India is in 1890. However, cheetah imports on a continuing basis occurred after World War I. According to the author's estimate, 200 cheetahs were imported into India between 1919 and 1947. In the post-independence period, 29 cheetahs have been imported between 1947 and 1994.

The findings of the research will serve the purpose of offering to interested scientists and others, a part of the vast knowledge that exists in India of the cheetah. It may well become useful if the animal is ever reintroduced.

* Divyabhanusinh's book on the cheetah in India is now with a publisher.