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Abstract: Record of a white cheetah and of a successful breeding in India in the 17<sup>th</sup> century .

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## RECORD OF TWO UNIQUE OBSERVATIONS OF THE INDIAN CHEETAH IN *TUZUK-I-JAHANGIRI*<sup>1</sup>

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The Mughal Emperor Jahangir, who ruled from 1605 to 1627 A.D., was an enigmatic person deserving the highest attention of any Naturalist. Inheritor of a large empire and successor to Akbar the great, he had the leisure, inclination and talent to hunt and observe Nature with such an astonishing accuracy that one would ascribe his observations to a scientific investigator of a later date. His memoirs, the *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, are replete with descriptions of hunts, animal behaviour, plants, fruits and even of a comet and a meteorite. He went to the extent of having some of his trophies weighed, measured and recorded, and in some cases, had them even dissected in his presence to satisfy his ever curious mind.

Unlike his father, Emperor Akbar, who caused his reign to be chronicled by his courtier Abul Fazl, Jahangir chose to write his own memoirs like his great-grandfather Babur.

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This he did in his own hand for the first 16 years of his 22 year reign. Many manuscripts survive but for the purpose of this article we shall confine ourselves to the edition of Sayyid Ahmad printed in Ghazipur in 1863 and Aligarh in 1864 which is accepted as the authentic version. It was translated into English by Alexander Rogers and edited by Henry Beveridge and published between 1909 and 1914.

I. In the third year of his reign (1608 A.D.), the Emperor records the following event:

'On this day<sup>3</sup> Raja Bir Singh Deo brought a white cheeta to show me. Although other sorts of creatures, both birds and beasts, have white varieties, which they call *tuyghan*, I had never seen a white cheeta. Its spots which are (usually) black, were of a blue colour, and the whiteness of the body was also inclined to bluishness. Of the albino animals that I have

<sup>3</sup> Saturday, 21st March or Sunday, 22nd March. The text is confusing about the day and date, though the month is not in doubt.

seen there are falcons, sparrow-hawks, hawks (*Shikara*) that they call *bigu* in the Persian language, sparrows, crows, partridges, florican, *podna* (*Sylvia olivacea*) [sic.], and peacocks. Many hawks in aviaries are albinos. I have also seen white flying mice (flying squirrels) and some albinos among the black antelope, which is a species found only in Hindustan. Among the *chikara* (gazelle), which they call *safida* in Persia. I have frequently seen albinos" (Rogers and Beveridge, pp. 139-40, Vol. I, 1909).

Let us look closely at the passage and see what it portends. The Emperor wrote his memoirs in Persian and the words for the white cheetah in the text are *yuz-i safed*. The Persians like the Arabs used the cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*) for hunting and distinguished it from the panther by giving it a distinct name. In Persian the word is *yuz* while in Arabic it is *fahd*. On the other hand, the much confused panther or leopard (*Panthera pardus*), was identified by the Persian word *palang* and by the Arabic word *namir* respectively. Jahangir was a keen hunter, who often hunted with cheetahs in the tradition of his father. It is inconceivable for anyone familiar with his life and times to believe that he could have confused the two. *Safed*, ofcourse, means white.

It is pertinent to note that even *Maasir-i Jahangiri*, a chronicle of Jahangir's reign written by one of his courtiers Khwaja Kamgar Husaini, also records this event and does so precisely though it is silent regarding the other white birds and animals seen by the Emperor (Alavi, p. 113, 1978).

It is therefore strange that Alvi and Rahman (p. 51, 1968) have taken the words to mean a snow leopard (*Panthera uncia*). Raja Bir Singh Deo was from Orcha in Central India. It is most unlikely that he would have come across a snow leopard in his life. On the other

hand his area must have had a large cheetah population if blackbuck (*Antelope cervicapra*), cheetahs' main prey, were any indication. British naturalist-sportsmen reported seeing groups of these antelopes of a thousand strong upto the days of the Mutiny (Forsyth, p. 60, 1886). Actually, it is recorded that cheetahs were caught from Mughal hunting grounds some 90 kilometres north-west of Orcha and elsewhere in Central India (Habib, Sheet 8B, 1982). It is more likely that a snow leopard (if there was one) would have accompanied a Himalayan prince whose name could not have ended with the suffix "singh deo" which is found only in a tract of land from Central India to Orissa.

The *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* text under reference gives the name as Raja Narsingh Deo. A person by this name does not feature otherwise in the life of Jahangir. Whereas, Raja Bir Singh Deo of Orcha was a close confidant of Jahangir, a frequent visitor to the imperial court and indeed the nemesis of Abul Fazl at the instance of Prince Salim. In all probability, the slip has occurred in transcribing the text from the original.<sup>4</sup> However, *Maasir-i Jahangiri* in its account gives the name correctly as Raja Bir Singh Deo (Alavi, p. 113, 1978).

Further, the passage describes in detail the "blue" spots and the whiteness of the body of the animal. In other words, the animal lacked pigmentation of its hair except the light or blue spots, and nor does Jahangir comment on the colour of its eyes. If there was something unusual about them, would the emperor

<sup>4</sup> Such a slip has also occurred in *Amal-i-Saleh* a chronicle of Shah Jahan's reign (Yazdani, p. 123, Vol. II, 1927). The name of Jhujhar Bundela's father is given as Nar Singh Deo while it is well known that he was the son of Raja Bir Singh Deo. Obviously the transcriber/editor has confused the word "Bir" with "Nar" which when written in Persian looks almost alike with a difference of only the dots for the letter, "noon" (Above) and "ba" (below).

have omitted its description? To illustrate the point let me quote Jahangir's reaction on seeing a Zebra at his court in the fifteenth year of his reign (1620 A.D.): "I saw a wild ass (*gur-khar*), exceedingly strange in appearance, exactly like a lion [sic.]. From the tip of the nose to the end of the tail, and from the point of the ear to the top of the hoof, black markings, large or small, suitable to their position, were seen on it. Round the eyes there was an exceedingly fine black line. One might say the painter of fate, with a strange brush, had left it on the page of the world. As it was strange, some people imagined that it had been coloured. After minute enquiry into the truth, it became known that the Lord of the world was the Creator thereof" (Rogers and Beveridge, p. 201, Vol. II, 1914).

To get back to the cheetah, Jahangir was so astonished at the sight of this particular animal, that he lists all the white animals and birds he had seen and comments with wonder that he had never seen such an animal before. The passage in question should be looked at more closely as the Rogers and Beveridge translation is not as accurate as one would have wished.

In describing the animal's spots the Persian text uses the words *neela rang*, i.e. blue colour. In the translation it is stated that the whiteness of the body "was also inclined to bluishness". However, a more accurate rendering would have been "inclined to (*hamagi mail dasht* in Persian) the same colour" (i.e. of the spots). The passage from *Maasir-i Jahangiri* which

records the same event when translated reads thus: "Raja Bir Singh Deo brought to the emperor a white cheetah. Its spots which are normally black, were of blue colour, and the whiteness of its body was also inclined to bluishness" (Alavi, p. 113, 1978)<sup>5</sup>.

In other words the white of the body had a tinge of blue. The light spots of the animal could have looked bluish with the white areas of the body tinged with the same colour with a side light falling on it. This is noticeably the case with the stripes of a white tiger.

In the translation the word albino is used at three places. However, in each case the word in the text is *tuyghan* which is a Turkish word and means white. A white animal can be either a mutant or an albino, as such, the translation is misleading. Now let us look at the white birds and animals seen by the Emperor: (a) *Shahin* (translated falcon) is derived from the Persian *Shah een asth* meaning a "king among raptors", it is *Falco peregrinus*; (b) *Basha* (translated Sparrow-hawk) is *Accipiter nisus*; (c) *Shikara* (translated hawks) is *Accipiter badius*; (d) *Kunjashk* (translated sparrows) is a general term in Persian for many small birds but it is mainly applied to sparrows; (e) *Za-gh* (translated crow) can be a jungle crow *Corvus macrorhynchos*, or a house crow *C. splendens*, or a carrion crow *C. corone*, or a raven *C. corax*; (f) *Kabk* (translated partridge) is the Persian *chukor*, *Alectoris chukar*; (g) *Durraj* (translated florican) is the grey partridge, *Francolinus pondicerianus*; (h) *Podna* or *bodana* is the grey quail, *Coturnix coturnix*; (i) *Taus* (translated peacocks) is the common peafowl, *Pavo cristatus*; (j) *Baz* (translated hawks) is the goshawk, *Accipiter gentilis*; (k) *Mush-i paran* (translated flying mice, flying squirrel) can be any one of the eleven different forms of flying squirrels found in the sub-continent; (l) *Ahu-i siyah* (trans-

<sup>5</sup> The editor has written the sentence as "*safedi-ye badan-i u niz mail-ba' milki dasht*". This in my opinion is an error in transcribing the text. The word *milki* here appears to be meaningless. There is a strong possibility that this word is *nilaki* which when written in Persian resembles very much the word *milki*. *Nilak* in Persian means bluish, a little blue.

lated black antelope) is the blackbuck, *Antelope cervicapra*; (m) *Chikara* (translated gazelle) is the Indian Gazelle, *Gazella gazella*.

It is apparent from the foregoing that Jahangir took great care to write this passage for, the event he was recording was unique indeed. What he was describing is a mutant cheetah rather than an albino. At any rate this is the only known record of a white cheetah throughout history.

Jahangir made a practice of commissioning his court painters to paint interesting birds and animals. For example, a turkey (*Theleagris gallapova*) reached his court from Goa. Not only did Jahangir order his painters to paint it, but also he went to great lengths to describe it, for he found the bird strange (Rogers and Beveridge, pp. 215-17, Vol. I, 1909). In another instance, Jahangir was so impressed by a falcon [identified by Dr. Salim Ali (Das 1983) as a red capped or Barbary falcon (*Falco peregrinus babylonicus*)] that was presented to him, that he specifically instructed his Master painter Mansur, to paint it even after the bird had died (Rogers and Beveridge, pp. 107-8, Vol. II, 1914). Both these paintings survive, the former is preserved at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, while the latter is at the Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum, Jaipur.

The memoirs make no mention of the white cheetah (or for that matter any of the other white birds or animals recorded in the passage) being painted. In this context, it may be noted that many animals and birds were painted by Jahangir's painters of which there is no mention in the memoirs. Thus to mention but two startling instances, there is a painting of a Mauritius dodo (*Raphus cucullatus* L.) considered by Dr. Salim Ali "to be the most scientifically accurate one extant" (Alvi & Rahman, p. 17, 1968), and there is a remarkably accurate painting of a Siberian crane

(*Grus leucogeranus*) done one hundred years before the bird itself was scientifically described by Peter S. Pallas (Sauvey 1981). Both these paintings are attributed to Ustad Mansur and fortunately both survive to this day, the former is preserved at the Hermitage, Leningrad, while the latter is at the Indian Museum, Calcutta. Did Jahangir have the white cheetah painted by one of his master painters? Did his court painters paint this rare animal as a matter of course? These questions must remain unanswered as such a painting has not been reported."

"There are other instances of white birds and animals recorded by the Mughals some of which may be noted: (a) Jauhar Aftabchi, Humayun's ewer bearer, who chronicled his master's life during the reign of Emperor Akbar, notes that Humayun ordered his painters to take the likeness of a white bird encountered by him (Das 1983). (b) The illustrated royal copy of the *Akbarnama* preserved in the Victoria and Albert, Museums, London contains a painting of Akbar slaying a tigress (*Panthera tigris*) near Gwalior in 1561 A.D. Two of the five sub-adult cubs slain with the mother are white (Divyabhanusinh 1986). (c) Emperor Jahangir himself received a gift of five "tuyghun" (White) *Baz* (*Accipiter gentilis*, could they have been *A. g. albidus* of which form "about 50% are white with pale bars"? Brown and Amadon, p. 454, Vol. II, 1968) erroneously translated as falcon, from Transoxiana in the thirteenth year of his reign, 1618 A.D. (Rogers & Beveridge, p. 10, Vol. II, 1914). (d) A white elephant (*Elephas maximus indicus*) reached Akbar's court from Arakan and a painting of this animal survives. Another white elephant reached Emperor Shah Jahan according to the *Padshah Nama*. (Chandra 1955-56) and there is a painting of "Dara Shikoh on a pink elephant" attributed to the famous painter Bichiter dated C 1628-30 A.D. (Beach, p. 105, facing p. 176, 1978). (e) A Mughal album of Emperor Aurangzeb's time preserved in Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum, Jaipur, contains a painting which has an albino house crow and a partial albino house crow (*Corvus splendens*) according to the identification done by Dr. Salim Ali (Das 1983).

II. In the eighth year of his reign (1613 A.D.), the Emperor records the following event:

"It is an established fact that cheetahs in unaccustomed places do not pair off with a female, for my revered father once collected together 1000 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 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" (Rogers and Beveridge, p. 240, Vol. I, 1909). *Maasir-i Jahangiri* records this event as well, and it contains exactly the same information (Alavi, p. 169, 1978).

This passage of the *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* is well-known and it has also been noted by scholars in the past (e.g. Ali 1927, Alvi and Rahman, p. 44, 1968). However, there are certain unique aspects of the event recorded in it which have been overlooked.

Firstly, this is the only record in history of trained cheetahs breeding. That these were Indian cheetahs makes it truly unique. Secondly, this is the only known instance of cheetahs breeding in captivity anywhere until the second half of this century. Philadelphia Zoo, U.S.A. bred African cheetahs in 1956 (Eaton, p. 33, 1974) thus, becoming the first to do so in captivity in our time. The period of gestation according to Jahangir was 75 days plus, for he records that the birth of 3 cubs took place "after two and a half months". No record is available of the breeding habits of the Indian cheetahs in the wild (Prater, p. 81, 1948)<sup>7</sup> while this is the only recorded instance in captivity. Information is available however, on the African cheetahs. In twelve instances observed between 1964 and 1968, the period of gestation varied between 86 and 95 days (Eaton, p. 30, 1974). Twentysix instances of

births were recorded among African cheetahs in captivity between 1956 and 1971. Of these, in 14 cases only a single cub was born, in 6 cases the litter was of 2 cubs each and in 6 cases the litter was of 3 cubs each (Eaton, p. 33, 1974). Thirdly, it is important to note that these cheetahs mated, conceived and produced cubs in captivity without any artificial interference, inducement or assistance. In fact, imperial attempts to induce breeding among cheetahs failed during the time of Emperor Akbar as the passage records. Finally, it is noteworthy that the cubs survived and grew up.

Actually, the rarity of this event was not lost on the ever so keenly observant Emperor though he did not have the benefit of our knowledge. He concludes this passage with the statement: "This has been recorded because it appeared strange". (Rogers and Beveridge, p. 240, Vol. I, 1909).

<sup>7</sup> There is a tantalising miniature painting dated C 1570 A.D. and tentatively attributed to Akbar's famous painter Basawan, of "A family of cheetahs in a rocky landscape". Its contents are described thus: "The mother lying in a glade, suckling one of her four cubs while grooming another, the other two playing in the foreground, the male cheetah lying amongst rocks on the right, a tree on the left with two palm squirrels, a pair of birds, and a monkey who watches the cats with interest" (Falk, Frontispiece, p. 18, 1978).

There are many paintings of cheetahs of the Mughal period but these are of hunts, court scenes, and such like. This is the only known surviving instance of a painting depicting a cheetah family in their natural surroundings. It may be possible that the animals portrayed here were studied from tame specimen. Yet it is a known fact that Mughal painters had personal field knowledge of animals in the wild since they accompanied their royal masters on hunts, travels and expeditions. Could this painting be the record by the painter of a natural scene observed by him? If so, we have a litter of four cubs in an Indian cheetah family in the wild.

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