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Abstract: A search through prehistoric findings, classical Greek and Latin, Sanskrit, Persian and British records have revealed many interesting aspects of the cheetah's cohabitation with the man.

A NOTE ON THE CHEETAH (ACINONYX JUBATUS)

By: Divyabhanusinh

A decade of research of the cheetah in the subcontinent has just been completed by the author. It has revealed interesting aspects of the cheetah's life in the Indian subcontinent some of which are summarized below:

A search through prehistoric findings, classical Greek & Latin, Sanskrit and Persian records have revealed many interesting aspects of the cheetahs brush with man.

Nearly 2000 years ago Strabo referred to tame pardalis walking in royal processions in India and Claudius Aelianus referred to tame pantehras 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 black lions being used in India for hunting game after being tamed.

While the first two references were in all probability to cheetahs, the 3rd reference was quite mixed up as lions have never been used for hunting game in India. With the information of India received often through secondary sources by the ancient Greeks and Romans had of India of the times, it may be that Claudius Aelinus was in fact referring to cheetahs. However, these are only probably references and not certainties.

The Amarakosa, the earliest Sanskrit lexicon believed to have been compiled between the 4th and the 6th centuries AD gives different name 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 on is yaghraya mrigaya which clearly records a King using citrakas to hunt krsnassara (blackbuck). This is the first Sanskrit record of hunting with cheetahs.

Among the Muslim record, the Tabagat-i-Nasiri of the 13th century 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 very well known to justify repetition here apart from mentioning that the cheetahs have been profusely recorded in literature, art, carpets and so on. Jahangir records seeing a white cheetah, the only such instance recorded. and he also notes the birth of 4 cubs at his court

which is the first recorded instance of cheetahs breeding in captivity anywhere. As is well known Akbar has 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.

After 50 years of the Battle of Plassy i.e. in 1808, the first work on sport in India was published by an English observer which mentions hunting with cheetahs. The main hunting pursuits of the British were large mammals such as tigers, elephants, guar, rhino, etc. The British as a rule did not appreciate the art of coursing with cheetah either. Though they were numerous in the 18th century, cheetahs were becoming rarer in the 19th and the last credible records of cheetah sightings are of the 1960's. An analysis of British and subsequent records has revealed that about 125 cheetahs were shot/ speared/ encountered/ definitely reported between 1799 and 1968. This survey is extensive by not exhaustive. Secondly the lion in India disappeared (except the Gir) about half a century earlier. During the same period though the lion was confined to areas above the Narbada, the cheetah on the other hand was found as far east as Orissa as south as Mysore.

The British and princely records reveal that the cheetah in the final phase of its existence in India was found at edges of jungles and not in its most preferred habitat. Among the causes of its extinction was the steady growth of human population from the Mughal times itself and the consequent conversion of grasslands into Agricultural lands which was not the best habitat for the cheetah to hunt its prey. Also 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 for reintroduction of the cheetah has been made in India so far but it would be possible to do so if there is political will to restore grasslands and protect existing prey base in them prior to such a reintroduction attempt. Dr.M.K. Ranjitsinh has suggested Khadir be in the Rann of Kuch as a suitable location for reintroduction, however, no steps have been taken in that direction.

The continuous issue of subspecific differences of cheetahs from Africa and Asia has been examined on the basis of the limited available material on the cheetahs from Asia. The study has shown very minor differentiation which could have been because of local environmental variations. 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 noticed and were recorded by Persian and English sources. 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) against cheetahs of the mountains, the former being lighter and the latter being darker in colour, the former being larger and better to hunt with because the latter did not course effectively as it was not used to do so in uneven terrain in the mountains.

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 to that over 30 different ailments of cheetahs are known along with their treatments. By far the most interesting finding was that breeding of the cheetahs in captivity was known to Indians and one document details some of the procedures involved.

The earliest known instance of a cheetah from Africa in India is that of 1890. However cheetah imports on a continuing basis was a development of the post World War I period. According to the author's estimate 200 cheetahs were imported into India between 1919 and 1947. In the post independence period a total of 29 cheetahs have been imported between 1947 and 1994.

The findings of the research will serve the purpose of offering to the interested scientist 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.