BIOGEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF ASIATIC LION (*Panthera leo persica*), CHEETAH (*Acinonyx jubatus venaticus*) IN ANCIENT, MEDIEVAL & MODERN RAJASTHAN: STUDY OF PLANS TO RELOCATE THEM IN RAJASTHAN

Puneet Sood
Legal Advisor and Wild Photographer, Wildlife Documentary Production House, SB188, Bapu Nagar, JLN Marg opposite Rajasthan University, Jaipur -302004, India

Corresponding Author: Email: extvp@yahoo.in
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ABSTRACT

Though intimately associated with India the original home of asiatic lion (*Panthera leo persica*) and asiatic cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus venaticus*) encompass far wide area. All the two animals have disappeared from length and breadth of their earlier home range. The lion and cheetah are animals of open country, deserts and grasslands. The state of Rajasthan, a largest state of India having an area of 342239 sq. km, was known by various names in history. The Sanskrit has words as Chitrak and Dvipi referring to Cheetah. Wild cheetah was present in area of Rajasthan in the Mughal period. The past and present distribution of lion, cheetah will enhance our knowledge about the two species. Study of plans, places of relocating the two species will help in conserving them. The proper understanding of their distribution in the past and present in the state of Rajasthan and identification of relocating habitats of their choices will help in conserving them. The present study is based on analysis of literature available on topic at other places, as Museum records etc. and visits to various places of proposed relocations. Asiatic lion has disappeared and has become extinct in whole of Rajasthan. Asiatic cheetah has become extinct not only from Rajasthan but also from India.

Key Words: Asiatic Lion, Asiatic Cheetah, Rajasthan, Phalodi, India

INTRODUCTION

Though intimately associated with India the original home of asiatic lion (*Panthera leo persica*) and asiatic cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus venaticus*) encompass far wide area. All the two animals have disappeared from length and breadth of their earlier home range. The lion based on references in paintings, buildings of many parts of Central Asia, Seria and West Asia has disappeared from the same.

Lion and cheetah are members of a small family Felidae. They are animals of open country, deserts and grasslands. Thus while studying geographical distribution of lion and cheetah it is important to note the names the culture provides to them. The lion is referred to as Singha while Cheetah is called as Cheetah.

The state of Rajasthan having an area of 342239 sq. km. is the largest state of India. It is located in North-west parts of India between 23°3’ to 30°12’ north latitude and 69°30’ to 78°17’ East longitude. It has habitats suited for lion and cheetah.

The state of Rajasthan encompasses an area which in history was known by various names as Jungal desh (Bikaner, Jodhpur), Kuru Jangla, Yodheya (S. Ganganagar), Kurudesh, Matsya desh, Sursena desh (Alwar). Sivi was in area of Udaipur while Baga, Maru (Jodhpur), were other area. Bhinmal was known in what is now Barmer while Mad was in what is called Jaisalmer. Swarnigiri (Sirohi) and Chandrawati (Abu) area of Kanthal is modern Mahi area. In more recent times Rajasthan was divided in Marwar, Mewar, Dhundhar, Baga, Chhapan, Hadoti and Mewat.

I have studied geographical distribution of lion and cheetah in Rajasthan and in its various parts through ages as Ancient, Medieval, Modern India.
Presence of lions in ancient Rajasthan is shrouded in mystery. Strabo, Pliny refer to it and Kushan remains tell story of lions in the area as ‘does the god Narsimha’s image in Rajasthan. There are seals from ancient Rajasthan of the lion facing a bull. Emperor Ashoka refers to it in Rock Inscription of Budha in Rajasthan.

In Medieval Rajasthan various clans of Rajputs started using Singh or rename showing their acquaintance and presence in the area (Map). In Medieval Rajasthan Emperor Akbar is known to have hunted lions in Mewat region. There were hunting parks in Rajasthan in Dholpur, Jodhpur, Nagaur having lions in them. Earlier Ulugh Khan, brother of Alauddin Khilji described Rana Hammir as lion in forest as showing its presence in the area. Various paintings of Jahangir present in Jaipur Museum depict lion. Jahangir describes lion in Bari near Dholpur. Museum at Kolkata describe lion hunting by Prince of Mewar and Mughal emperor Jahangir, near Ajmer. Various hunting paintings from Kota, Bundi (By Birhan Singh order) show lion hunting. The Mewar record shows many lions that were hunted as in Rajasmand. Victor Jacquemont describes a wild lion in Bikaner deserts. In more recent time there were lions near Mount Abu (In 1891). Also a lion was met near Kota in 1950 by Maharawal Ranjeet Singhji.

As per attempts to find a second home to lion in Rajasthan was made by Indian Board for Wildlife by a committee consisting of R.S. Dharmakumarsinghji and M.K. Ranjit Singhji. They studied Jaisalmer in Rajasthan but nothing comes after this report. Various studies in Sitamata Sanctuary in Chittor district emphasized disturbance by villagers and insufficient prey base as reasons for not shifting lion as was the case of Kumbhalgarh sanctuary which also has different habitat suited for lion. If these problems can be addressed the Sitamata can be a good second home for lion.

The Sanskrit has words as Chitrak and Dvipi referring to Cheetah. The cave paintings of cheetah (as a spotted animal) are in the valley of Chambal in the tribal area of Rajasthan. Arrian (2nd Century A.D.) refers to presence of Cheetah. So as to testifies presence of cheetah. Akbar is said to have encountered Cheetah in the wild as do the emperor Jahangir in Sanganer near Jaipur who killed many cheetahs in Rajasthan a testifying the presence of cheetah.

Wild cheetah was present in area of Rajasthan in Mughal Times at Jodhpur Merta, Nagaur, Jhunjhunu, Sikar, Amarsar and Dholpur (Map). Mughal miniature from Rajasthan is a proof of cheetahs in Rajasthan. Various studies of birds and animals in Aurangzeb times from Rajasthan and their results has been kept in Jaipur, Bikaner, Mewar showing its presence in Mughal area. Cheetah’s presence in Mewar has been testified by Maharana’s hunts in 1725-30. According to Jerdon (1867) the range of cheetah includes Rajpootana.

Phalodi area in Jodhpur district has been identified for relocation of few of cheetahs.
Biotic pressure is intense in all over the places of relocations for Asiatic Lion, Cheetah and environment and also environment degradation is also widespread.

**IMPORTANCE OF THE SUBJECT**

Various attempts have been made to study geographical distribution of endangered / threatened and now extinct species but none has been attempted for desert state of Rajasthan, through ages in history. The past and present distribution of lion, cheetah will enhance our knowledge about the two species. Study of plans, places of relocating the three species will help in conserving them.

**HYPOTHESIS**

The hunting / poaching of Asiatic lion and cheetah and increasing human population has led to disappearance of the two species from all parts of Rajasthan through ages. The proper understanding of their distribution in the past in the state of Rajasthan will help in relocating into habitats of their choices.

**AIMS AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

Various works on distribution and relocation of asiatic lion and cheetah have been forwarded on National level but none has been done on Rajasthan state level. The present study is an attempt of studying past distribution of Asiatic lion, cheetah on Rajasthan level. It also includes assessment of human impact and biotic pressure around areas in which the two species are planned to be relocated in Rajasthan as well as environmental issues in the same areas.

**METHODOLOGY**

The present study is based on analysis of literature available on topic at other places, as Museum records etc. visits to various places of planned relocation as well as studies in forests, museum, places, paintings of past was done.

The author also studied journals of various organisations and also analysed records of Rajasthan State Forest Department as management plans, other plans as also zoo records. Author visited numismatics, remains rock edicts, other edicts, miniature paintings, other paintings or mures; cave paintings to deduce what kind of species were present there and study Shikar records and post independence era.

**RESULTS AND CONCLUSION**

As from study of various sources it can be lead that asiatic lion were present in Mewat, Merta, Nagaur, Dholpur, Jodhpur, Ajmer, Kota, Bundi, Udaipur, Banswara, Mount Abu and Bikaner areas of Rajasthan in ancient medieval time. These have disappeared becoming extinct in whole of Rajasthan. Various works have been forwarded for relocation of lion in Sitamata Sanctuary and Jaisalmer region but not attempted due to lack of prey base, biotic pressure and reluctance of Gujarat Government.

As for Cheetah it can be said that it was present in Rajasthan in Jaipur, Jodhpur, Bikaner, Merta, Nagaur, Jhunjhunu, Dholpur, Udaipur, Chittorgarh and Mewar areas of Rajasthan and has become extinct not only from Rajasthan but also from India.

Various plans have been made for relocation of Cheetah envisaging introducing a pair from Iran and breed it in Rajasthan but it failed.

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