

Introduction

The forests of Jharkhand – literally meaning “*The Land of Forests*” – once used to be the prime-shooting blocks for yesteryear British *Sahebs* posted in Bengal. “The finest shooting grounds I know of in India -- and I have been over the greater part of the country -- are in Chota-Nagpore ” (Smith 1904), wrote one of them. Those were the days of plenty. Today, it’s a completely different land; gone are the *Sahebs*, and so are the days of plentiful wildlife.

Most of the state’s erstwhile wild-bastions — Saranda, Hazaribagh and Chatra being the most prominent — have been completely destroyed. A relict population of Jharkhand’s major fauna makes a last stand in the famed forests of Palamu. As I would find out during my research, the list of animals gone extinct from the State is long – Asiatic Lion, Great Indian One-Horned Rhinoceros, Indian Cheetah, Gharial, Pink-headed Duck and Central Indian Wild Buffalo to name a few. The loss has been tremendous and unparalleled, and even now there seems no stopping to it. And it’s this sense of loss, and the grief that followed it, that inspired me to research on the state’s illustrious past. Even though the story of every animal on the aforementioned extinction list deserves to be penned down separately, this paper however, deals with the tale of *Jharkhand’s Last Hunting-Leopards*.

Cheetahs of Saranda

“It is generally believed that the Cheetah is only found in the more open parts of the scrub jungle of Central India, but I have killed them in the dense forest of Saranda in Chota Nagpur. The skin is differently marked to that of the panther. Both have a yellowish brown ground with black spots. The spots on the panther are rosettes; on the cheetah they are simply black dabs without a central opening of yellow.....The cheetah, or hunting leopard, in no way resembles the ordinary leopard or panther. The latter has retractile claws like the cat, while the cheetah's paws are like those of the dog. Most shikarees are agreed that he belongs to the hyaena family, and is to that animal what the greyhound is to the foxhound.” (Smith 1904) — wrote Mervyn A. Smith in his book *Sports and Adventure in the Indian Jungle*.

Published in March 1904, the book was a compilation of his stories that had originally appeared in columns of the *Calcutta Statesman* over the years. The approximate time-period of the events he narrated would have been the late 19th century.

The forests of Singhbhum district in southern Jharkhand, better known as the Saranda Landscape straddles through south-Jharkhand and parts of northern Orissa. Saranda, Asia’s largest Sal forest, once used to be one of the richest “*game-tracts*” in India, copiously stocked with Tigers, Leopards, Deers, Gaurs, Elephants, Central Indian Wild Buffaloes, Dholes and all the other smaller forest denizens. A favorite hunting ground of the British Officers posted in Bengal, the forests of Saranda were labeled as “*savage, rugged, uninhabited, and infested with wild beasts; where the rivers swarmed with fish, reptiles and crocodiles*”. Today’s Saranda is emblematic of the brutal destruction of Jharkhand’s flora and fauna. Gone are the Tigers, Cheetahs, Central Indian Wild Buffaloes, Gaurs and Dholes; there are no more than a few dozen Cheetah in the core ~1000 sq.km area Saranda division, a handful of Sambhar might survive though they have not been seen for years and even the most optimistic estimates peg the Leopard population at less than a dozen. Almost all edible fauna has been wiped off forever, Saranda’s forest have lost their soul. A few hundred elephants somehow tenaciously hold-on — a relic that serves as a sad reminder of the wonder that was Saranda. With the wild-animals all but gone by the late 80’s, the big mining companies came in, and hundreds of mines (both legal and illegal) representing all the major mining-players gnawed away their “fair share” of the forest. Mining townships came up in the heart of Saranda; while for the locals their serene and peaceful Saranda became an abyss --- people started dying every-year due to breathing-ailments caused by iron-dust that envelopes the environs of the mined areas (Hindustantimes 2011). The once pristine *Karo* and *Koina* rivers that used to “*swarm with fishes and crocs*” turned into envenomed