

The 'Mirzapur Connection' And The Possibility Of Cheetahs Occurring In 'Shahabad' District

Bordering the erstwhile larger Palamau district to the north-west is the present-day Sonebhadra district of Uttar Pradesh, which was once a part of erstwhile larger Mirzapur district of United Provinces. And to the north of Palamu, in Bihar, lies a clump of four districts – Rohtas, Kaimur (Bhabua), Bhojpur and Buxar. Together, they constituted the former district of Shahabad which ceased to exist in 1972. A study of these two districts, though they are not a part of Jharkhand, is critical towards understanding the occurrence Cheetahs in the Palamau as well as northern Jharkhand.

The common thread that ties these two British-era districts bordering Palamau is the Kaimur Hill Ranges. Covering a major part of the Mirzapur district, they run through – what used to be – south Shahabad (i.e. present day Rohtas and Kaimur districts). The Kaimur ranges in those days were wooded for most of its part with mixed deciduous forests, but they were bespeckled with plateaus (such as the Rohtas plateau) – which in those days consisted of a mixture of open scrub forests and agricultural lands – as well. These areas of Kaimur abounded in Chinkara and Blackbuck. From the northern and north-eastern foothills of the Kaimur ranges, flat alluvial plains north Shahabad (present day Buxar and Bhojpur district) extended for miles; while the Son river ran parallel to the eastern and southern foothills of the Kaimur (beyond the southern foothills lay *Muhammadganj* in Palamau, which will be described in detail in the next section). In Mirzapur, the Kaimur ranges dominated the extreme south of the district while in the central part, the ranges decreased in height and formed a huge shallow valley/open flat plain around Robertsganj, Ghorawal, Marihan, Khairpur and Sirsee. Save for a few passes, these plains were surrounded on all sides by the forested hill ranges of the Kaimur. These areas too were Chinkara and Blackbuck strongholds. Though the Chinkara kept itself confined to the forests of Kaimur hills, the Blackbucks inhabited the hill ranges as well as the plains of North Shahabad (i.e. today's Mohania plains in north Kaimur, Buxar plains and plains of Bhojpur) and that of Mirzapur around *Robertsganj et al.* A few hundred of these forgotten blackbucks – though extinct from most of its former range in the landscape – precariously survive in the agricultural plains of Buxar, Bhojpur and Robertsganj, largely because the local farmers venerate these "*Krishna-mriga*" as a holy animal.

And in the light of the above description, it's easy to analyze this note written on 10th Aug, 1919 by G.O. Allen of Mirzapur:

"The following notes on two uncommon mammals in Mirzapur District may perhaps be of interest in connection with the Survey. On 28th December 1912, during a sambhar beat in light jungle about 25 miles S. of the Ganges, a small animal that I did not recognize came out at very close range. I blew a large piece of its back away with a 500 Express but it made off and took refuge in a small nala where it was shortly afterwards despatched with a shot gun. It proved to be a female lynx (*F. caracal*) My measurement made it 34 inches long (body 27 and tail 7) apparently a rather small example. Unfortunately the only memento I have of it are the claws, as shortly after I got the head mounted it was destroyed in a bungalow fire. This is considered locally a distinctly rare animal. I saw not long ago in the possession of a friend a very fine skin of a cheetah (*C. jubatus*) that had been killed in 1916 by villagers about 30 miles South of Mirzapur, which is on the Ganges near Benares. I think about 5 have been obtained in the last 25 years, one being shot while it was in the act of stalking a sambhar. The one whose skin I saw had been killed in the neighbourhood of a grassy plain which held some Black buck." (Allen 1919).

If one looks up the map today, he will observe that '30 miles South of Mirzapur' is the approximate directional distance of the foothills of Kaimur ranges around Sirsee and the shallow plain valleys of *Ghorawal*. Clearly, with the geographical features of this area and the one-time abundance of Cheetah's preferred prey – Blackbuck, Chinkara (as well as the odd Sambhar which they sometimes preyed upon) – in this area, it's now easy to



Geography of South Mirzapur (contemporary Sonebhadra District) with a view of the Mohania Plains and the Shallow-Valleys of Ghorawal, Robertsganj, Khairpur, Marihan and Sirsee

comprehend why Cheetahs and its sympatric smaller cousin i.e. Caracals were shot in Mirzapur.

Curiously enough, the *Mirzapur District Gazetteer* authored by *D.L. Drake-Brockman* in 1911 makes no mention of the Cheetah in his section on fauna of the district, while he writes that “Lynx are rare”. (Drake-Brockman 1911).

Another Cheetah skin was obtained in *circa* 1927, the details of which are provided by *Frank Finn* in his book *Sterndale’s Mammalia of India*, published in 1929. He states:

“One specimen, which from its skin must have been very old, was killed by villagers in the Mirzapur district (which borders on Rewah) about two years ago” (Finn 1929).

Where exactly was the animal shot in Mirzapur is unknown (the reference to Rewah was given because prior to the line quoted above, the author talked of Lord Hardinge – the viceroy – shooting a Cheetah in *Rewah* state, which today forms the Rewa district of Madhya Pradesh). The above reference would be the last time Cheetahs are mentioned from Mirzapur; in all probability they went extinct from the district by *circa* 1930.

South Shahabad, as elucidated above in detail, was a similar land as well – both geographically and in terms of faunal diversity. However, unlike Mirzapur district, which has definitive records of the occurrence of Cheetah; there are none for Shahabad. Nonetheless, I firmly believe that they would have occurred in South Shahabad region as well – the open plateaus that dot the ranges near Rohtas, the foothills plains to the north of the ranges near Mohania and the plains around river Son near the eastern and southern foothills of Kaimur ranges in Shahabad – being my best bet. A few historical references further strengthen my speculations. For instance, *Edward B. Baker* wrote:

“It may occur in the Santhal Pergunnahs, and in the southern and hilly parts of Shahabad, but this cannot be asserted from my experience; nor have I ever seen its skin brought in by “Shikarees” in Bengal, Behar, or Orissa.” (Edward 1886).

“Behar” here doesn’t refer to contemporary Bihar state; it was a British province that included a few districts of today’s southern Bihar. And it’s worth noting here that Cheetahs were indeed later shot in Santhal Pargana as we shall see in the later section.

Another curious reference that drew my attention was the description of a *Kuiah* or Wild Dogs in W.W. Hunter’s Statistical Account for the district of Shahabad. Hunter quoted *Dr. Buchanan-Hamilton’s* (who wrote a journal of his travels in and around Shahabad in early 19th century) description of the wild dog. Following are the excerpts from the section on *Ferae Naturae* of Shahabad:

“Leopards, viverrine cats and the wild dog or koa also abound....it may be distinguished from other kindred animals by having a compressed tail, in which respect it resembles the hunting leopard.” (Hunter 1877a).



Cropped map of Eastern United Provinces from The Imperial Gazetteer of India’s Map Of United Provinces, 1907 Khairpur, Marihan and Sirsee