

## Cheetahs of ' Palamow '

South of Shahabad, east of Mirzapur and north-west of Palkot, lies a cluster of four districts — Lohardagga, Latehar, Palamu and Garhwa. The last three were once a part of the larger erstwhile district of Palamow or Palamau, while Lohardagga — once a prominent district in the mid 19th century, ceased to exist after the districts of Ranchi and Palamow were carved out of it in *circa* 1890 — became a sub-division under the Ranchi District upto 1983.

Cheetahs once inhabited Palamow, though there are no particular shooting incidents or locations to pin-point the area of their distribution within the district. Stray references, coupled with the fact that Cheetahs occurred in adjoining districts, however confirm that they were met with and perhaps even shot in Palamow. *Edward B. Baker*, in his book *Sport in Bengal and How, When and Where to Seek It* published in 1886 writes:

“I have never myself met with a single *F. jubata* in the wild state, and have never heard of one being killed east of Palamow in Chota Nagpoor.” (Edward 1886).

Even though the above statement doesn't explicitly state the Cheetah's distribution in *Palamow*, Baker suggestion that he 'never heard of one being killed east of *Palamow*' seems to hint at the fact that even though not killed east of *Palamow*, Cheetahs were killed/occurred in *Palamow*. Ofcourse, we now know that Baker was wrong in his assumption because Cheetahs were indeed killed east of *Palamow* in Saranda and as we will later discuss in areas of *Santhal Pargana* as well.

There is another reference to Cheetahs occurring in Palamau. L.S.S. O'Malley in his Gazetteer of Palamau district published in 1907, after a few lines on Leopards, writes:

“The Cheetah is occasionally met with.” (O'Malley 1907).

In 1926, P.C. Tallents revised L.S.S. O'Malley's original Palamau Gazetteer of 1907 and authored the Revised Palamau Gazetteer. However, when Tallents revised the gazetteer in 1926, in addition to O'Malley's original reference to the Cheetah, he added this new content:

“The Cheetah is occasionally met with. An animal which is said to be a cheetah has been carrying off children from the neighbourhood of Untari for some years past and has hitherto evaded capture although a large reward has been put on its head.” (Tallents 1926).

And this is a really confusing reference, for on one hand the republishing of O'Malley's original 1907 reference to Cheetah by Tallents hints towards the Cheetah's continued existence in Palamau right upto his days (i.e. atleast early 1920's); but Tallents' second statement of “*an animal which is said to be a cheetah carrying off children*” makes me doubt if the animal he refers to was indeed a Cheetah. I say this because even though a Cheetah is fully capable of lifting off children, there hasn't been a single reference upto now anywhere from India which records a Cheetah attacking a human-being. So there are two possibilities — either the “*Child-lifter of Untari*” wasn't a Cheetah and this was a case of mistaken identity, or else this is perhaps the first documented case of a Cheetah attacking humans. Which of the two is correct is anybody's guess! But we must remember this – nature has this uncanny knack of throwing up the most amazing surprises just when we start assuming that “we know it all”!

Then there is yet another rather late reference to Cheetahs of Palamow. Sir John Wardle Houlton, a retired I.C.S. officer and an infrequent hunter, dedicated a chapter describing the wildlife of Palamau in his book Bihar, *The Heart Of India* published in 1949. In Chapter 29 of the book, titled “*Forests and Wildlife in Palamau*”, he writes:

“Wolves are occasionally seen, and the cheetah or hunting leopard is believed to survive in Palamau” (Houlton 1949).

Though this account of his was published in 1949, the content and travels narrated in the text were undertaken in the early 1900's to late 1930's. His other descriptions of Palamau's fauna and its distribution are very accurate; and he is right when he says that wolves are occasionally seen. They are still there, in the valley of Mahuadanr in what is today Latehar district — perhaps being the last wolves of the Sal forest! And just like in the days of yore, even today they are very rarely seen, though they regularly make-off with goats and pigs of the villages in the area. However, I doubt if Cheetahs had survived in Palamau upto the late 1930's, in all probability they were gone by then.

So, all these varied references spread over a good 60 years confirm the Cheetah's presence in Palamau, although the details are very sketchy.

Even though there are no specified areas of Cheetah's occurrence in the district, I believe that they wouldn't have been an inhabitant of the renowned forests of Palamu Tiger Reserve (located in the south of the district). They would have rather dwelled in the northern areas of the district characterized by large open tracts, most probably around a place called Muhammadganj. And the reason I believe this particular area was the Cheetah's haunt in *Palamow* is Muhammadganj's geographical location, which would have made it an ideal habitat for the Cheetah. Muhammadganj, lying on the banks of North Koel river, located just below the junction of the erstwhile districts of Mirzapur and Shahabad, has large open tracts in its immediate vicinity, while ~16-18 kms to its north and west, its flanked by Kaimur hill ranges. The western area, though flanked by Kaimur hills is also dotted with open tracts. At the foot of the Kaimur hills to the north of Muhammadganj, the extremely wide and shallow *Son* river runs almost parallel to ranges, with the North Koel joining it from the south. To the east and south of Muhammadganj are open tracts for miles and miles, though parts of the eastern and southern area are interspersed with forested uplands. Although today completely taken up by agricultural fields, all these open areas that surround Muhammadganj were a mixture of scrub forests and agricultural fields 100-150 years back. And so it's now easy to comprehend why Muhammadganj was also a historical Black-buck and Gazelle stronghold in Palamow — the open scrub tracts as well as the '*Chaur*' grasslands in wide shallow bed of Son, would have provided them an ideal habitat to live in. This naturally would have made this area an ideal Cheetah habitat as well. The flat-lands and open scrub forests of the area as well as river Son's *Chaur*s, well stocked with prey in the form of Blackbucks, Chinkaras and even the odd live-stock, would have provided ample of hunting opportunities; while the undulating rocky terrain at the forested foothills of Kaimur to the north and west (as well as the forested uplands in east and south) would have provided refuge to the Cheetah as well as doubled up as safe-spots for rearing up cubs.

This theory of mine finds further support in the fact that Cheetahs and Blackbuck disappeared from Palamau almost successively i.e. in the first half of the 20th century. While the Blackbucks were once abundant till the mid 19th century, their numbers had started plummeting by the end of the century with more and more area being brought under the plough. *L.S.S. O'Malley* wrote in his 1907 Palamau gazetteer that only "a few black buck (*Antelope cervicapra*) are to be found in the open country to the north" (O'Malley 1907). ("*The open country to the north*" is the Muhammadganj area). The fragile Cheetah, who like in most other areas would have occurred in low-densities here, must have failed to cope up with this sudden decline in its chief prey as well as the alteration of its habitat; and the killings that would have surely occurred as a result of these developments, would drive the last nail in the coffin of *Palamow's* Cheetahs. A few stragglers however might have persisted in Palamu right upto to the late 1920's or early 1930's, perhaps the reason behind the continued reference to animal's presence in Palamau even upto the mid 1930's. Within a few decades of the Cheetah's extinction from the area, the last few blackbucks that O'Malley talked about disappeared as well — the hunter and hunted being united for once in their journey to the netherworld.

If for a moment we believe that the "*Child-lifter of Untari*" was a Cheetah indeed, then it throws up an interesting picture. The landscape of *Untari*, now known as *Nagar Untari* —



**Location of Muhammadganj with a view of the Son River and Kaimur Ranges to its North; Alongwith the location of Untari, Dhurk hills and the Shallow Valleys of Kone, Khauraundhi and Bhawanathpur**

located almost right at the tri-junction of Jharkhand's Garhwa district, Chattisgarh's Surguja district and Uttar Pradesh's Sonebhadra (erstwhile Mirzapur) district – would have been prime-Cheetah habitat. A few kilometers to the south of Untari lay the forested Dhurk Hills of Garhwa, which are even today pretty well connected with the famed forests of Palamu Tiger Reserve. To the east and west of Untari lay flat open plains for miles, interspersed with a few uplands. To the north, Untari was flanked by the foothills of Kaimur – a rather thin branch of Kaimur that extended right upto Muhammadganj in an eastward direction; while beyond this Kaimur branch, about 9 kms north-east of Untari, lay the large plain valley of Bhawanathpur, Kone and Kharaundhi, the former two completely encircled by Kaimur ranges. These two valleys of Bhawanathpur and Kone would have been a small-scale mirror image of the Ghorawal valley of Mirzapur, some 65-75 kms north-west of these two valleys, where, as explained in the previous section, Cheetahs weren't uncommon. So landscape-wise, the area of Untari was completely suited for Cheetahs, but was the "*Child-lifter of Untari*" a Cheetah? — the answer to this question shall never be known.