

Hazaribagh ----- The Missing Link!

Cheetahs occurred in southern Jharkhand, western Jharkhand and existed in the easternmost districts of the state as well. So there was continuity in the distribution of Cheetah from western to southern Jharkhand, but the Cheetahs of Santhal Parganas formed an isolated reference. There are no known records of Cheetahs inhabiting lands above the Ganges, so it was impossible that they came down into the Santhal Parganas from the north. So either they came into the area through the west or they came from the South. Now the straight-line distance between Muhammadganj in the west and Deoghar in the east was around 290 kilometres, and this was almost exactly the same distance between Deoghar and Jeraikela to its south-west. Surprisingly, there was no mention of Cheetahs being encountered anywhere in between these three areas. So, there was a missing link somewhere!

I guessed that it was more likely that Cheetahs came into Santhal Parganas from the west, for there were miles and miles of thick forests separating Deoghar and Jeraikela to its south-west whereas to the west of Deoghar, the terrain was much more conducive for a Cheetah influx. And to Deoghar's west lay the large district of Hazaribagh which connected Jharkhand's west to its east. Today, the former larger district of Hazaribagh has been split up into seven districts — Chatra, Hazaribagh, Koderma, Giridih, Dhanbad, Bokaro and Ramgarh.

Even though the west and west-central part of the district was substantially forested in those days, the terrain of east-central and eastern Hazaribagh was very similar to that of western Santhal Pargana (i.e. the areas around Deoghar). So I concluded that Cheetahs must have occurred in Hazaribagh as well, hence creating a continuity in distribution of the species from west to east Jharkhand. However, there were absolutely no references to back this belief of mine. None of the *Shikar* books, Natural History books, district Gazetteers or historical travel accounts even remotely suggested of their occurrence in Hazaribagh district.

I poured over records after records, books after books, yet the efforts were of no avail. And I was almost about to give up when I finally struck gold! I was going through W.W. Hunter's 20 volume series describing the districts of Bengal Presidency, the first volume being published in 1875 and the last in 1877. One of the most experienced and celebrated officers of his day, Hunter knew these lands really well. He had extensively traveled the length and breadth of the state, and had also written a two-volume book on his travels in Orissa. As I flipped on to page no. 41 of the 16th volume in the *Statistical Account Of Bengal* series — this volume describing the districts of Hazaribagh and Lohardagga (as I've explained previously Palamau was a part of Lohardagga) — my joy knew no bounds. My hunch had finally been confirmed in the sub-section on the *Ferae Naturae* of the district. Hunter wrote:

“The low conical hills with which the surface of the district is dotted afford a fine refuge for bears and leopards; and the sonā chitā, or dog-leopard, distinguished by non-retractile claws, is occasionally found.” (Hunter 1877b).

This was the first and perhaps the only reference to Cheetahs of Hazaribagh. The missing link between the western and eastern Cheetah references had been found! Yet, this reference is woefully inadequate to make a guess on the area of distribution within the district. However, there are a few clues!

To the north-east of Palamau and north of Hazaribagh lies the district of Gaya, sharing almost its entire southern border with Hazaribagh. Though most of Hazaribagh district is an upland plateau, on this Hazaribagh-Gaya borders runs a low hill-range covered with dry deciduous forests and dotted with ridge-valleys. To the north of this hill-range lie the plains of Gaya while to the south lie the more open tracts of Hazaribagh which would have been a mixture of scrub forests and agricultural lands in Hunter's time. In those days, the dry deciduous forests of the hills and the ridges along with the foothill scrub

forests were stocked abundantly with Gazelles or the Ravine Deer as they were called by the British, Sambhar, Cheetal and other game. The open plains of Gaya to the north of these hill-ranges abounded with blackbucks, and a herd of 60-100 bucks wasn't an uncommon sight in those days. Blackbucks however didn't occur to the south of the hill ranges in Hazaribagh. The plains of Gaya extended right upto the Shahabad plains of Bhojpur, Buxar and Rohtas. So it seems that Cheetahs entered Hazaribagh via Shahabad and Gaya, crossing through the ridge-valleys of the Hazaribagh-Gaya hill-ranges. And then they would have moved further east of Hazaribagh into the Santhal Parganas. Another alternate route the Cheetahs could have used to enter Hazaribagh, and then move further east, may be going straight east of Muhammadganj in Palamau to reach the open tracts of east-central Hazaribagh. However, that the Cheetah would have entered Hazaribagh taking this route, is very unlikely for this route via Chatra (a district today, it was a sub-division of Hazaribagh in those days) was very thickly forested in those days for more than a hundred miles (it still is a pretty substantially forested area, though highly degraded now). So was the case south of Hazaribagh, with thick forests separating the districts of Hazaribagh and Ranchi. So even though Cheetahs occurred in southern and western parts of Ranchi, it's unlikely that Cheetahs would have entered Hazaribagh crossing the heavy forests of south Hazaribagh. But then if Cheetahs could have lived in Saranda, who knows— maybe these Cheetahs of Jharkhand might have waded their way through thick forests to populate new areas and even inhabited the forest peripheries in most of these regions. One can never be sure. Some mysteries it seems, are destined to remain so forever.

But what can be demystified to some extent is the extinction of Cheetahs from Hazaribagh. To me it seems that they, just like in rest of Jharkhand, disappeared somewhere in between the last decade of the 19th century and the first few years of the 20th century. The basis of this assumption of mine is the fact that the next detailed account of Hazaribagh's fauna written by E. Lister's in his 1917 Gazetteer of Hazaribagh makes no mention of the Cheetah in the area, even though it catalogues almost all other animals described by W.W. Hunter in his account. Moreover, Lister writes in the preface to this Gazetteer: "This Gazetteer has been compiled on the basis of the Statistical Account of Hazaribagh, which was prepared about 1875 under the supervision of Sir William Hunter.", (Lister 1917) and curiously enough Cheetah and Gaur were the only two animals mentioned in Hunter's account that had been excluded by Lister. And so the Cheetahs of Hazaribagh disappeared *circa* 1890-1910.

However, it's possible that some Cheetahs might have survived in Hazaribagh inspite of Lister not mentioning them — I say this because an odd Gaur would come over into Hazaribagh through the *Palamu-Chatra* corridor right upto the late 1990's. Moreover, there have been cases when Gazetteers have failed to mention Cheetahs even though they did occur in the area. The Gazetteers of Singhbhum and Santhal Parganas never mentioned Cheetahs in their checklist of fauna of the area even though they had been shot in both the districts. Even W.W. Hunter's Statistical Account for Santhal Parganas and Singhbhum fails to mention Cheetah among the fauna found in the area even though Braddon and Mervyn Smith respectively shot them in these districts almost exactly at the same time as the publication of Hunter's accounts. Similarly, Drake-Brockman doesn't mention Cheetahs in Mirzapur District Gazetteer's section on the district's Fauna, even though atleast 6 cheetahs were obtained from the district between *circa* 1894-1927.

Ranchi Gazetteer didn't mention them explicitly, but one particular reference of a "type of panther", as I found out was actually to the Cheetah. (See Appendix III - The "Mystery Panther" of Ranchi District.)