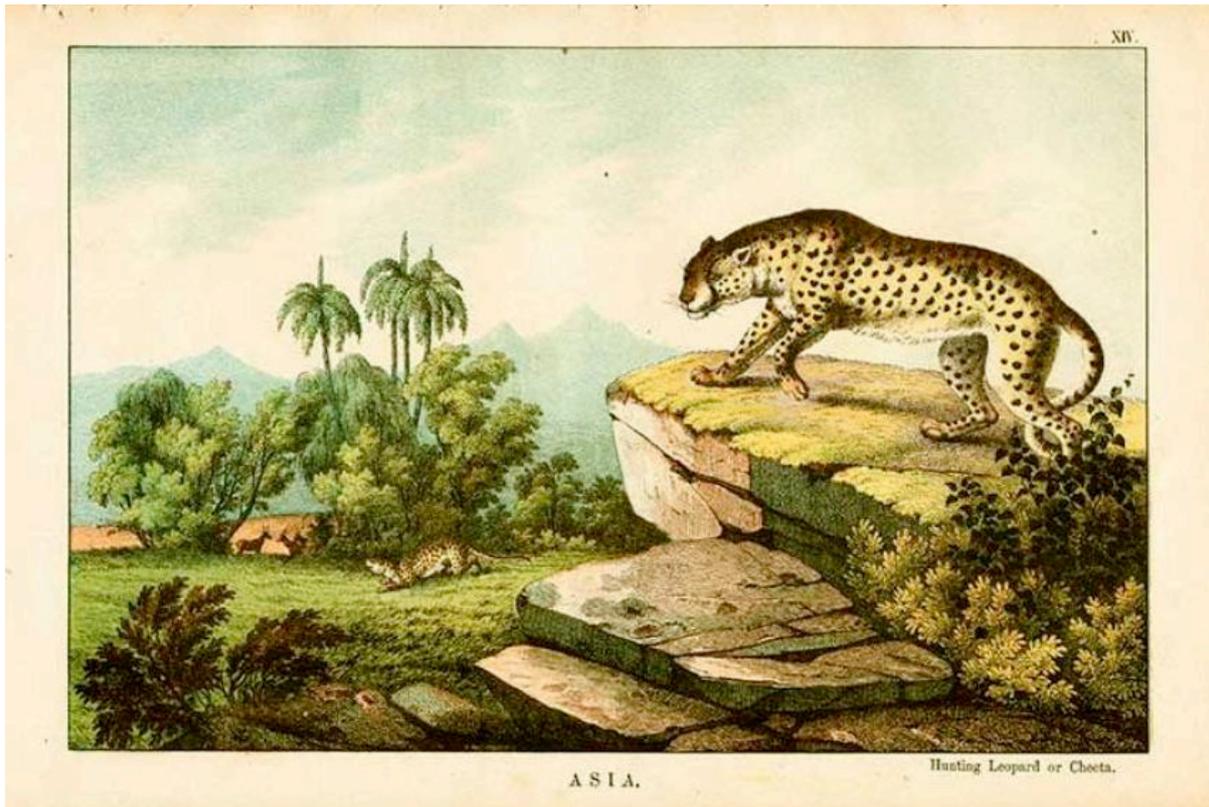


Appendix III – The “Mystery Panther” Of Ranchi District



Two 'Hunting-Leopards' on a hunt --- one of them stalks the prey, while the other stands on a vantage point atop a few rocks. This rare painting was published in *The Instructive Picture Book - Lessons from the Geographical Distribution of Animals or the Natural History of the Quadrupeds which Characterise the Principal Divisions of the Globe*; Edmondson & Douglas, 1860.

"Rock Panther"! — Those two words caught my attention as I flipped through the pages of yet another district Gazetteer — the Ranchi District Gazetteer. What was this "Rock Panther" I wondered, for I hadn't ever come across this name in the hundreds of archival books and papers that I had poured over during my research. The *Ranchi District Gazetteer* was published in 1917 by *M.G. Hallett*, though Hallett admitted that much of the material quoted in the text had actually been compiled by his predecessor *T.S. Macpherson* – who for some reason could not complete his work – between 1909 and 1912. In his gazetteer, Hallett writes in the section on Leopards:

"Biru Pahar and Palkot are typical rocky hills where leopards are to be found, and from the former no less than eight leopards have been killed in one year. The distinction between the rock and the wood panther, though admitted by few naturalists, is very clear in this district. The former is smaller, the spots closer and without any resemblance to a finger print; the head bullet-shaped and the ears small and pricked. This animal is rarely dangerous and confines its depredations to goats, pigs, and even fowls. The larger species is frequently a cattle-destroyer, and in the years 1911 to 1913 leopards were reported to have killed 1720 head of cattle. During this period also 207 leopards were killed for rewards." (Hallett 1917).

And the post independence revised Gazetteer of Ranchi (published in 1970) compiled using information that had been collected post this Hallett's 1917 Gazetteer, further added to this description. This revised Gazetteer said:

"Leopards or Panthers (*Felis pardus*) are common in this district. No man-eating Leopards have been reported, though maulings have been frequent due to the animals being wounded. The low rocky round Palkot and Biru are the favorite habitat of leopards. * *In the next few lines, Hallett's 1917 reference quoted above is republished* *

The Adivasis distinguish three types of leopards or panthers. The 'Dog-eater' or 'Kukur Khaia' the smallest of the trio lives and hunts round villages and is bold enough to enter even into huts." (Kumar 1970).

The characteristics of the other two Leopard types described in the gazetteer viz. "*Bija Phuliya*" and "*Pahar Chita*" were almost the same as what the British used to call the "*Tree Panther*" and the "*Grass Panther*" respectively. Even though today there are no recognized sub-species of Indian Leopards, during the days of the Raj, almost all British Naturalists and hunters unanimously agreed that there were two types of Panthers or Leopards in India — the larger and stockier "*Grass Panther*" which had a brighter rosette coat, and the smaller & lighter "*Tree Panther*" which had a duller coat. However, I had never come across any reference to anything known as the "*Rock Panther*". Almost every standard natural history book of the British days says that the apart from the two types of Leopards, the only other spotted feline of the mainland i.e. the third '*Leopard*' is the '*Hunting Leopard*' or *Felis jubata* or the Cheetah.

And, I for one am pretty confident that the "*Kukur Khaia*" of the Adivasis and Hallet's "*Rock Panther*" is the same animal, and this animal is nothing but the Cheetah itself. Apart from the nomenclature anomaly for the so called '*Rock Panther*', that I've just explained, there are four other clues as well in the above two quoted texts that were critical to my conclusion. They are:

Hallett says that this '*Rock Panther*' is "*smaller, spots more closer and without any resemblance to a finger-print, head bullet shaped and ears small and pricked*". This description bears some resemblance to that of the Cheetah. I suppose what Hallett means by the words "finger-prints" is the "rosette spots" on a Leopard's body that look like finger-prints and serve the same purpose as well (as no two Leopards have the same rosette pattern). Cheetahs on the other hand don't have these rosette spots, the spots on their body being mere black round dabs. Moreover, by the words "spots more closer", Hallett, I suppose, meant the "*density of spots*". A Cheetah is more '*densely spotted*' as compared to a Leopard; by densely spotted I mean the number of spots per unit area of a Cheetah's coat (ideally the flanks) will be more as compared to the number of rosettes in a correspondingly equivalent unit area of Leopard coat. And I believe it's because of these two reasons that Hallett calls this '*Rock Panther*' as having "*spots more closer and without any resemblance to a finger print*".

Hallett also writes that the '*Rock Panther's*' head is "*bullet shaped*". To me, this sounded a typical description of the Cheetah's head/skull. However, to be on the safer side, I contacted *M.K. Ranjitsinh*, an eminent conservationist and a Cheetah expert. I asked him a simple query; "Between the Cheetah and the Leopard, which one according to you would fit this description – "*Head bullet shaped*" ? " His reply was short and sweet – "Cheetah, clearly."

The most plausible reason why Hallett calls his '*Rock Panther*' "*smaller*" than the ordinary Leopard could be the fact that the general appearance of the stockier and much more heavily built Leopard is always more imposing than that of the lean and lighter built Cheetah; and hence even though the two animals are almost of the same size (i.e. head to tail length), a lay man will describe the Cheetah's appearance as being smaller to that of Leopard.

And the description of the "*small and pricked*" ears of Hallett's '*Rock Panther*', somewhat matches the Indian Cheetah's general description in all natural history books right from Blanford (1888), Lydekker (1896) Sterndale (1884) and Pocock (1941). All would write that this feline had "Ears short and rounded". Perhaps Hallett's choice of the word "*pricked*" though was wrong for both Cheetah and Leopards have rounded ears. However, the use of the word "pricked" by Hallett to describe the '*Rock Panther's*' ear-shape also throws up an intriguing comparison – the most common animal we see with "pricked ears" is the dog, and the Cheetah was infrequently also referred to as the "dog-leopard" !

The revised gazetteer says that the Adivasis' "*Dog-eater*" or "*Kukur Khaia*", just like Hallett's '*Rock Panther*' is the "*smallest of the trio*" of spotted felines and "*hunts around villages*". Cheetahs hunted in open tracts, and over the last century such open tracts were more often than not "around villages — the books by Mervyn Smith and a few others have narrated how Cheetahs which often loitered around in the open tracts on the village peripheries would pick up the village dogs from these areas. And this dog-eating Leopard of the adivasis was "*bold enough to enter even into huts*". Now, even though a Leopard is perfectly also enough to enter into huts, in light of all the other accompanying descriptions of this animal — that were more Cheetah-like than Leopard-like — the two names that immediately flashed-up as I read this description were "*Braddon*" and "*Mervyn Smith*". Braddon, as already narrated before in detail, had twice killed Cheetahs in Deoghar that had broken into huts in pursuit of village livestock; while Mervyn Smith had narrated how a Cheetah tunneled his way into a hut to seize a calf. However, it's extremely unlikely that Cheetahs had survived in Ranchi district by the time of this gazetteer's publication (i.e. 1970); most probably the content of this particular reference was a few decades old.

Nonetheless, the above two references leave room for ambiguities. However, it was these lines by Hallett that are unmistakably reminiscent of the classic description of Indian Cheetah's demeanor. "*This animal is rarely dangerous and confines its depredations to goats, pigs and even fowls.*" wrote Hallett describing the '*Rock Panther*'. A Leopard — even though it would happily go for Goats, pigs and fowls — would never "*confine its depredations*" to just these animals, which is evident when Hallett writes "*the larger species is frequently a cattle-destroyer, and in the years 1911 to 1913 leopards were reported to have killed 1720 head of cattle*". However, the Cheetah on the other hand, had always "*confined its depredations*" to exactly these small livestock viz. Goats, pigs and fowls (along with an occasional lifting off of a calf).

Moreover, if Hallett's '*Rock Panther*' was indeed a Leopard/Panther, he certainly would never ever be considered "*rarely dangerous*", especially during the days of the Raj when the district administration was hell bent on making their countries free of Leopards and Tigers. The only large-feline that has ever been given that honor of being "*rarely dangerous*" by the British is — yes, it's the Cheetah! This was because this gentle cat never attacked Humans and his depredations of the smaller livestock were almost negligible against — what the Sahebs would regularly term as — "*the large-scale livestock damage caused by Tigers and Leopards*".

And then finally, the area of "*Biru Pahar and Palkot*", which this small and rather harmless so-called '*Rock Panther*' is said to have inhabited, is the exact area where a Cheetah was shot *circa* 1905, as I've already narrated in the section A Cheetah Shot in the erstwhile '*Greater Ranchi*' District.

And so everything perfectly added up, there were just too many similarities to ignore; and hence I arrived at my conclusion. I later consulted Divyabhunsih Sir as well to get his views on this *Rock Panther* reference. And he agreed, this description seemed to be that of a Cheetah to him as well.

Hence the puzzle of *The "Mystery Panther" of Ranchi District* has been finally solved, it seems. But does that mean that the "*eight Leopards killed in a year*" in the area of Biru Pahar and Palkot were actually Cheetahs? Unfortunately, it's impossible to determine the answer to this question; maybe all were Cheetahs, maybe some of them were and maybe none of them were. We shall never know.