

# JHARKHAND'S LAST 'HUNTING-LEOPARDS'

Raza Kazmi\*

*An account of the Cheetah in Jharkhand (including new hitherto unrecorded references); with appendices on their distribution in Orissa and a newfound record of their occurrence in West Bengal*

## Prologue

The story of the Indian Cheetah has always been an enigma, and though its trail has been lost in the sands of time, the life and death of the Cheetah still continues to fascinate a section of natural historians and conservationists. With the new debate of reintroducing Asiatic Cheetahs in India generating sharply divided opinions in the clique of wildlife conservationists, studying the history and distribution of this unfortunate species in greater detail becomes all the more important.

While the British wrote volumes upon volumes on the more illustrious big cats of India – Tigers, Lions and Leopards – and other wild-fauna of the country; the Cheetah remained conspicuously absent from most of those detailed narratives. A few exceptions granted some lines here and there, a page or two at most, to this little understood big-cat. The Cheetah's story came to an end in 1947 through the barrel of *Maharaja Ramanuj Pratap Singh Deo of Korea's* gun, though the prelude to this sad end had been written decades back. And even though the Maharaja's kin reported the presence of a few stragglers, including a pregnant female, in the forests of Chhattisgarh's Surguja district (of which the erstwhile state of Korea was a part) right upto 1967-68, while a couple of alleged sightings were reported from Orissa-Andhra Pradesh border and Chittoor district respectively in the early 1950's (Divyabhanusinh 2006); the last post had already been sounded for the Cheetah in India. It was only in the last years of the 20th century that the Chita's story finally found a voice in Divyabhanusinh's seminal work *The End Of A Trail: The Cheetah in India*.

It took me about 3 months to collate the data I've used in this paper, and another month to compose this text. During my research, I discovered a number of new Cheetah-references that haven't been recorded up until now in any present day literature on the species that I'm aware of. Divyabhanusinh's work has enlisted rest of the sources that I will quote, though due to space constraints, they had been quoted in snippets or as bulleted references in his book; I will try to narrate those accounts in greater length and detail.

Tracing the history of Cheetahs in Jharkhand has been a pretty difficult job, given the fact that very scant literature is available on the species' natural history in India as a whole, and that for the present day state of Jharkhand is miniscule. No *Mughals* came hunting in this part of the country, so there are no royal records dating back to those days. The sport of *Coursing with Cheetahs*, which was pretty popular among the princes of Central and North-west India, was literally unknown in this wild east-central Indian state, and hence there are no princely records on the Cheetah to fall back onto. Few British wrote about the fauna of this part of *Hindoostaan*, and those few who did write about their sporting experiences in the forests of *Chota-Nagpore*, much like their sporting comrades elsewhere in the country, never mention anything about the Cheetah. It was just a single book that makes exception to this norm, describing the Cheetahs of Saranda in some detail. All the other sources for reconstructing the Cheetah story in Jharkhand are scattered snippets on the animal in a few *Shikar* books, district gazetteers and other government records. As a result, all the narratives and references to Cheetah in the state start and end within a span of 100 years, i.e. from mid 19th century to early 20th century. I'm yet to come across any narrative of Cheetahs in Jharkhand prior to the 19th century.

Another problem I faced was the fact that those few references I had with me were written at a time when the administrative-divisions of the area were completely different from what they are now. So, I was burdened with the additional task of studying the

history of each of Jharkhand's 24 odd districts in order to pin-point the present-day locations of the Cheetah-bearing areas cited in the 19th and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century texts. And then there was yet another contentious issue at hand — the name of the animal itself! There are very real chances that Cheetahs might have been bracketed as Leopards in a number of historical texts. In those days, there was great ambiguity among hunters, administrators and naturalists alike regarding the nomenclature of Leopards and Cheetahs. A sample of this confusion is reproduced below — Here, *Edward B. Baker in his book Sport in Bengal: How, when and where to seek it* published in 1886, suggests that the name "Leopard" should be actually applied to the "Cheetah" while what is generally called a Leopard should be actually addressed as a Panther!

"we have three distinct species, not counting, of course, the "cheetah," or hunting-leopard (*F. jubata*), viz.: first, the *F. pardus* or leopardus (whether you choose to call it panther or leopard), divided into two varieties, the greater and the lesser; secondly, the *F. (pardus or leopardus) melas*, or black panther; and thirdly, the *F. (pardus or leopardus) macrocelis*, or clouded panther. If the designation "leopardus" or lion-pard, is to be understood as indicative of the appearance of the beast, it is an unfortunate one, because the Bengal pard bears no resemblance whatever to the lion, whereas *F. jubata* does so to the small extent of displaying long fur or hair on its crest, neck, and breast, and also some slight resemblance in its tail, which is thickly furred at its extremity. It seems, therefore, that the name of leopard should be applied in ordinary conversation to the *Felis jubata*, or "cheetah," alone, and that of pard or panther to the others. I shall abide by this rule in all mention of these creatures, and I respectfully commend it for the consideration of the learned as both reasonable and convenient" (Edward 1886).

The above book being one of the standard texts on the wildlife of Bengal Presidency for a number of years could have caused many other authors (especially those of the Bengal District Gazetteers) to classify Cheetahs as Leopards and Leopards as Panthers. And Baker's opinion wasn't an isolated one – *Sterndale* echoed the same view in his book *Natural History of Mammalia of India and Ceylon* and so did a number of other authors; infact I've observed this idea of Cheetah being the actual 'Leopard' being reiterated in dozens of books and gazetteers that I've gone through during my research. It's possible that many important references to Cheetahs, especially in the area of Bengal Presidency, will never be identified due to the use of such equivocal terminologies in the historical texts. I however, for the sake of uniformity, have included only those references that explicitly use the Latin name "*jubata*", or the term "*Hunting Leopard*", or wherein I'm convinced that the author while using the term "*Cheetah*", is aware of the striking characteristics that differentiate it from Leopards. An exception to this rule was made in a single case which has been described in Appendix III.

Even an expert of Divyabhanusinh's calibre agreed that scope for new additions to the story of Indian Cheetahs remained. And I would reiterate the same, my work is by no means a complete history of Cheetahs in Jharkhand, and hopefully as I delve deeper into the subject, new additions would be made.

**\*Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. E-mail: [raza.kazmi17@gmail.com](mailto:raza.kazmi17@gmail.com)**

### About the Author

Raza Kazmi is a 21 year old engineering student and a passionate wildlife enthusiast. Brought up in Palamu and Hazaribagh, he has lived in Bhopal pursuing an engineering career. He roamed the forests ever since I was barely an year old and later in childhood he enjoyed a day of trekking with his father for some 20 kms on the Barwaadih hills, while he and his forest staff doused a forest fire that had engulfed the place. He was a baby when he saw his first Tiger in Palamu, according to his parents who inculcated in him the love for the forests and its denizens. His parents also explained their importance and taught him the nuances of conservation. He spent numerous hours in various forests of Jharkhand and elsewhere but Palamu claimed a special place in his heart. Today he is an independent writer, usually about conservation in Naxal dominated forests and lesser known Tiger Reserves and neglected wildlife regions of the country. He is a history buff and has taken up researching the wildlife history of the East Central Indian landscape. The booklet on the Cheetah is a direct result of his efforts in this direction. His ultimate goal is to get into the Indian Forest Service. He feels that a single honest and dedicated officer in charge of a forest can do much more for the forest and its wildlife than all the activism in the world can ever achieve.