

Introduction

The forests of Jharkhand – literally meaning “*The Land of Forests*” – once used to be the prime-shooting blocks for yesteryear British *Sahebs* posted in Bengal. “The finest shooting grounds I know of in India -- and I have been over the greater part of the country -- are in Chota-Nagpore ” (Smith 1904), wrote one of them. Those were the days of plenty. Today, it’s a completely different land; gone are the *Sahebs*, and so are the days of plentiful wildlife.

Most of the state’s erstwhile wild-bastions — Saranda, Hazaribagh and Chatra being the most prominent — have been completely destroyed. A relict population of Jharkhand’s major fauna makes a last stand in the famed forests of Palamu. As I would find out during my research, the list of animals gone extinct from the State is long – Asiatic Lion, Great Indian One-Horned Rhinoceros, Indian Cheetah, Gharial, Pink-headed Duck and Central Indian Wild Buffalo to name a few. The loss has been tremendous and unparalleled, and even now there seems no stopping to it. And it’s this sense of loss, and the grief that followed it, that inspired me to research on the state’s illustrious past. Even though the story of every animal on the aforementioned extinction list deserves to be penned down separately, this paper however, deals with the tale of *Jharkhand’s Last Hunting-Leopards*.

Cheetahs of Saranda

“It is generally believed that the Cheetah is only found in the more open parts of the scrub jungle of Central India, but I have killed them in the dense forest of Saranda in Chota Nagpur. The skin is differently marked to that of the panther. Both have a yellowish brown ground with black spots. The spots on the panther are rosettes; on the cheetah they are simply black dabs without a central opening of yellow.....The cheetah, or hunting leopard, in no way resembles the ordinary leopard or panther. The latter has retractile claws like the cat, while the cheetah's paws are like those of the dog. Most shikarees are agreed that he belongs to the hyaena family, and is to that animal what the greyhound is to the foxhound.” (Smith 1904) — wrote *Mervyn A. Smith* in his book *Sports and Adventure in the Indian Jungle*.

Published in March 1904, the book was a compilation of his stories that had originally appeared in columns of the *Calcutta Statesman* over the years. The approximate time-period of the events he narrated would have been the late 19th century.

The forests of Singhbhum district in southern Jharkhand, better known as the Saranda Landscape straddles through south-Jharkhand and parts of northern Orissa. Saranda, Asia’s largest Sal forest, once used to be one of the richest “*game-tracts*” in India, copiously stocked with Tigers, Leopards, Deers, Gaurs, Elephants, Central Indian Wild Buffaloes, Dholes and all the other smaller forest denizens. A favorite hunting ground of the British Officers posted in Bengal, the forests of Saranda were labeled as “*savage, rugged, uninhabited, and infested with wild beasts; where the rivers swarmed with fish, reptiles and crocodiles*”. Today’s Saranda is emblematic of the brutal destruction of Jharkhand’s flora and fauna. Gone are the Tigers, Cheetahs, Central Indian Wild Buffaloes, Gaurs and Dholes; there are no more than a few dozen Cheetah in the core ~1000 sq.km area Saranda division, a handful of Sambhar might survive though they have not been seen for years and even the most optimistic estimates peg the Leopard population at less than a dozen. Almost all edible fauna has been wiped off forever, Saranda’s forest have lost their soul. A few hundred elephants somehow tenaciously hold-on — a relic that serves as a sad reminder of the wonder that was Saranda. With the wild-animals all but gone by the late 80’s, the big mining companies came in, and hundreds of mines (both legal and illegal) representing all the major mining-players gnawed away their “fair share” of the forest. Mining townships came up in the heart of Saranda; while for the locals their serene and peaceful Saranda became an abyss --- people started dying every-year due to breathing-ailments caused by iron-dust that envelopes the environs of the mined areas (Hindustantimes 2011). The once pristine *Karo* and *Koina* rivers that used to “*swarm with fishes and crocs*” turned into envenomed

drains. What happened to the *mahaseers*, crocs and other aquatic-fauna that "swarmed" these rivers needs no elucidation. And then came the Maoists, making this forested landscape a bastion of theirs -- the locals, already stung by the mining onslaught, were now caught in the crossfire between the rebels and the security forces. The local *Hos* now rue the cardinal sin they committed by destroying Saranda's fauna for the extinction of these endangered species created fertile ground for the eventual entry of the big-mining industries. Alas it's too late! Saranda is on its last lease today, and even though an odd transient Tiger sometimes wanders into these forests via the narrow degraded Saranda-Similpal corridor, Saranda is all but a lost cause.

Anyway, coming back to the Cheetahs, the forests of Saranda were the southernmost limit of Cheetah's range in Jharkhand. Though there are no known records up until now of the Cheetah's occurrence on the Orissa side of the Saranda, it's likely that they might have existed there given the contiguity of forests.

Cheetahs of the Saranda landscape, akin to their counterparts in other Cheetah-bearing areas of India, did prey upon the livestock of the villages on the periphery of the forests. Mervyn Smith writes:

"It is singular that while the tiger, the leopard and the wolf are the recognised enemies of the cultivator, in that they prey on his flocks and herds, and that the Government offers a reward for the destruction of these predatory animals, probably the most daring and destructive of all, and the one which does more damage to cattle and goats than all the other wild animals put together, is generally regarded as a harmless creature and one to be protected rather than destroyed. One reason perhaps for this good name is that the cheetah, or hunting leopard, has never been known to prey on mankind, while tigers, leopards and wolves are all known to be maneaters on occasion." (Smith 1904).

And though I personally find Mervyn Smith's statement of Cheetah being "*the most daring and destructive of all, and the one which does more damage to cattle and goats than all the other animals put together*" a crude exaggeration, it certainly did prey upon the livestock in the area. He narrates a curious incident of a Cheetah making off with a pet Cheetal, at a place called *Jaraikele* near Saranda in present day West Singhbhum District of Jharkhand.

"At Jaraikele, on the Bengal-Nagpur Railway, a villager had a pet spotted deer, which would follow him about like a dog His hut was in the heart of the village. One warm moonlight night he drew his charpoy (bedstead) as usual across the entrance of his hut and slept on it. While he was asleep, a hunting leopard crept under his charpoy, seized and killed the deer, and crept back the way it came, drawing the deer after it, and made off to the woods. The man only knew of his loss on awakening in the morning, when the unmistakable doglike foot-prints of the animal showed who the midnight marauder was." (Smith 1904).

Jaraikele must not be confused with *Saraikele* though, as it has been in Diyaabhanusinh's book, the former being a small station on the Mumbai-Howrah Trunk line. Its location has been marked on the map.

Another incident questions the general belief that Cheetah's preyed on light-weighted animals. Mervyn Smith narrates the incredible feat of a ~40 kg Cheetah preying on a calf thrice his own weight.

"Not long ago one of these brutes entered the village of Bendee during the dark hours just before dawn. It dug a passage for itself through the wattle-and-dab walls of the bazaar-man's hut, seized and killed a two-year-old calf, and endeavoured to drag the body through the passage it had made for itself, but the calf's body was too large to pass that way. The noise made by the cheetah's efforts to drag the calf through the hole in the wall awakened an old woman who was sleeping in the hut, and she immediately opened the door, rushed out and raised an outcry. The cheetah, seeing the door open, re-entered the dwelling and pulled the calf away through the door! It made off to a neighbouring nullah and there devoured the stomach

and a great part of the rump. The calf certainly weighed over 200 lbs.; yet the cheetah was able to drag the body several hundred yards, when its own weight could not have been over 70 lbs. even if full grown.” (Smith 1904).

A few rare narrations by others such as T.G. Fraser who recorded a Cheetah hunting a full grown Sambhar in the grasslands of Burhanpur, (Fraser 1881) lends further support to the argument that Cheetahs indeed could hunt animals which were many times its own body-weight.

Much like their other spotted cousins i.e. Leopards, Cheetahs also seem to have had a liking for domestic dogs, or atleast that was the case here in Saranda. Mervyn Smith personally lost as many as 7 dogs to the Cheetahs over a period of 18 months, and he narrates one such incident in detail:

“The cheetah is particularly fond of dog's flesh and does useful service in carrying off superfluous pariah dogs which otherwise would increase to such an extent as to be a source of danger to the villagers themselves. It is seldom one sees a dog in the country where the hunting leopard has taken up its abode. Sooner or later even the 'cutest of 'cute pariah dogs falls a victim to its arch enemy. I have had seven dogs carried away from my bungalow in eighteen months. Among these was a black pariah that the servants had named *Hooseearee* (the wary one), so alert was it. I often tried to tempt it out with a bone after dinner, but no; hungry or not, *Hooseearee* was not to be cajoled into the open. One night while I was having my dinner, a *pheeall* (an animal of the jackal kind said to act as a decoy to tigers, leopards and other of the great carnivora) sent forth its hideous howl near the servants' quarters. *Hooseearee* gave chase. Instead of making for the jungle, which was near at hand, the *pheeall* made for some logs of timber lying in the open. As soon as the black dog in pursuit of the *pheeall* neared the timber, swift as a flash of light the cheetah was on him and seized him by the back of the neck; a single bark of agony and *Hooseearee* was no more. I fired twice at the cheetah, but he was off like a bird, carrying the body of the dog with him.” (Smith 1904).

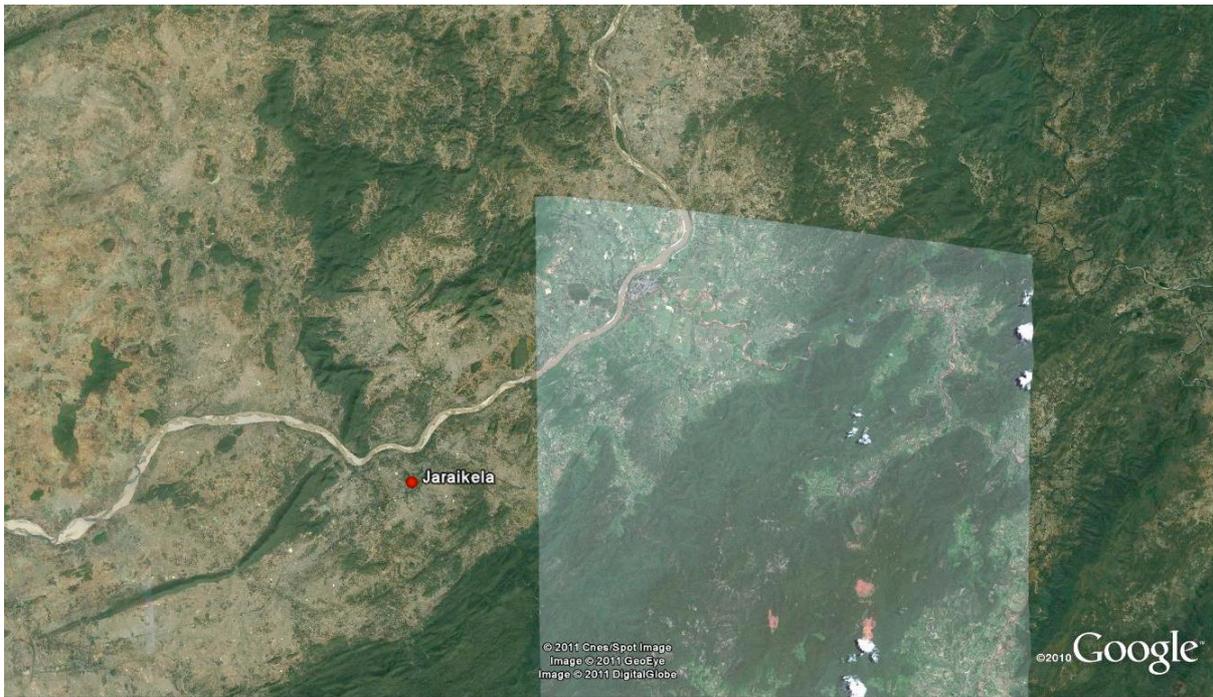
He further narrates the audacity of the Cheetah in the following lines:

“After the loss of *Hooseearee* I had all my dogs shut up in a godown at dusk every evening. On several occasion I was awakened by the furious barking of the dogs, and generally found signs in the morning that the cheetah had tried to enter through a barred window. After several attempts to break in this way he gave it up, as he found iron bars too hard for even his powerful teeth. But one day three of my dogs accompanied the syces taking out my horses for their morning constitutional. All three were large dogs, halfbreeds, about the size of a foxhound. One of them was particularly large and heavy. All had broad leather collars with steel pricks to protect the neck from the assaults of wild animals. The horses were being promenaded along the road within half-a mile of my bungalow, when a cheetah sprang out of the neighbouring bushes and seized the largest of the dogs by the neck, in spite of his protecting collar, and made off with him.” (Smith 1904).

I've also come across a hitherto unrecorded new reference of two Cheetahs being shot near Somij, a village on the periphery of the Saranda forests.

“Beema, the *bagh-maree*, has to my knowledge accounted for two panthers, two cheetahs (hunting leopards), one tiger and one bear. Their skins now adorn the verandah of my bungalow. These animals were all killed within a mile of the village of Somij (Chota Nagpore district), and in about two months' time.” (Smith 1904).

Cheetahs of Central and Northwest India were almost always encountered in grasslands or open scrub and rocky landscapes. However, the last Cheetahs to be shot in India were found inhabiting dense Sal forests of Surguja in present day Chhattisgarh state. But they were in all probability stragglers that had been pushed to seek refuge in the forested areas of Ramgarh due to persecution and destruction of their preferred habitat. This belief is based on the statements of Maharaja Ram Chandra Singh Deo, who said:



Location of Jaraikela Village on the Periphery of Saranda

“It is strange that Hunting Leopards were found in Ramgarh region in 1951 as the area is not a proper habitat for them. The area is very heavily forested and the forests stretch to 50-60 miles in all directions. It is difficult to explain how the hunting leopards came to Ramgarh. They have never been even heard of in Ramgarh and the adjoining areas” that Cheetahs were unknown in the area of Ramgarh prior to 1951.” (Divyabhanusinh 2006).

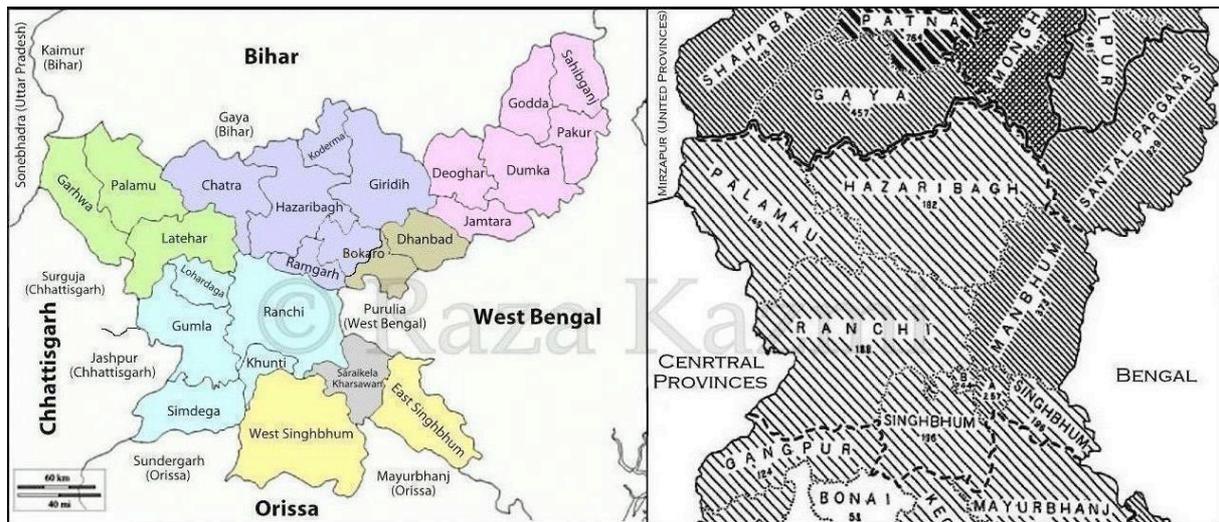
Ramgarh is located on the southern edge of Surguja district with the Hasdeo-Arand forests of Korba district forming its southern purlieu. Divyabhanusinh argues that Ramgarh being an open flat cultivated patch surrounded by scrub and degraded forest interspersed with small open grassland patches, would have caused the Cheetahs that had sought refuge in the nearby Sal forest to gravitate to this area (Divyabhanusinh 2006).

But was this the case in Saranda landscape as well? It’s important to note than unlike Surguja where the Cheetahs were shot in the last phase of their existence in the country, those in Saranda were shot/observed in the mid 19th Century, about 100 years prior to their extinction. So could it be that the Cheetahs of Saranda landscape, unlike their counterparts in central, peninsular and north-western India, might have over the years actually adapted themselves to the dense Sal forest habitat and made it their preferred habitat as well? Or were these Cheetahs like all others of their race, inhabitants of the more open areas around Saranda where they hunted, while they sought refuge on the peripheries of Saranda landscape’s dense forests?

Theoretically speaking, it is possible that the Cheetahs of Saranda had actually adapted to and made the region’s dense forest their preferred natural habitat. I say this because even today there are very few scrub forests in and around Saranda, much less they would have been 150-200 years ago. Moreover, all the areas where Cheetahs were met with or shot at were either inside or right next to Saranda’s dense *Sal* forests. However, since there is no solid data on the Cheetah population of the area over a considerable period of time to conclude on its habitat-use pattern, the above viewpoint of mine is at best just a hypothesis. So, for the time being, it seems the answer to this question will remain a mystery.

When did Saranda’s Cheetahs go extinct is yet another mystery, but in all probability they had disappeared by the dawn of 20th century. None of the district gazetteers of

Singhbhum, starting from W.W. Hunter's statistical record of 1877 to O' Malley's gazetteer of 1910, make any mention of the Cheetah among the fauna of the district even though all other prominent mammals of the area are recorded. V. Ball, the famous geologist who recorded his extensive travels in the region of Chota-Nagpur, Singhbhum, Surguja, Central and Northern Orissa between 1865-1878 in his book *Jungle Life in India* makes no mention of the Cheetah during his travels in the region of present day Jharkhand. So, it seems that the Cheetah, just like in the rest of its historical range in India, was never very abundant in this landscape as well, or atleast that was the case by the mid 19th century; and coupled with the insatiable appetite for hunting among the *Hos* and the *Kols*, even the stragglers must have been wiped out by the turn of the 20th Century.



Map of Jharkhand as of 2011

L.S.S. O'Malley's Map of Bihar and Orissa, circa 1900

LEGEND

- Former Palamau District
- Former Ranchi District
- Former Singhbhum District
- Former Hazaribagh District
- Former Santal Parganas District
- Part of Former Manbhum District
- Former Princely State of Saraikela

A Comparison Between the District-Organization of Contemporary Jharkhand to that In the Days of the Raj © Raza Kazmi