

Cheetahs of 'Santhal Pergunnahs'

Located south of Bihar's Bhagalpur district, about 200 kms as the crow flies east of Palamow borders, Santhal Pargana or "*Santhal Pergunnahs*" as the British called it, was the easternmost district of contemporary Jharkhand state. Today, though the district has ceased to exist, the name "Santhal Parganas" still lives on. It is one of the five administrative divisions of Jharkhand and comprises of 6 present day districts of eastern Jharkhand viz. Deoghar, Jamtara, Dumka, Godda, Pakur and Sahibganj.

The District Gazetteer of the district by L.S.S. O'Malley brilliantly describes the physical aspects of the Santhal Pargana as they used to be in his days. He writes:

"The district is an upland tract with a hilly backbone running from north to south. To the north and east it is flanked by a long but narrow strip of alluvial soil hemmed in between the river Ganges and the Rajmahal hills. These hills rise abruptly from the plains, forming a wall 1000 to 2000 feet high, which juts out into the Gangetic valley and forces the Ganges to bend to the east before it takes its southerly course to sea.

Broadly speaking, the district may be divided into three parts, viz. the hilly portion which covers about 3/8th of the entire area, the rolling country covering half of it and the flat country which occupies the remainder..... The hills are in many parts still covered with jungle, while in the valleys, some of which are of considerable size, are scattered small villages surrounded by cultivated clearings. The rolling country includes whole of the west and south west of the district. It contains long ridges with intervening depressions, in places rocky and in places covered with scrub jungle. The third division consists of a fringe of low-land between the Ganges and the hills, which is largely cultivated with rice and liable to annual inundation." (O'Malley 1910).

The area of Santhal Pargana, which once boasted abundant wildlife including the Great Indian One-Horned Rhinoceros till the mid 19th century, was completely emptied of its fauna by the beginning of the 20th century. And the sole culprit for this devastation was the quenchless hunting thirst of the local *Santhal* tribals. Rhinos, Elephants and Tigers successively disappeared within a span of 60 years between *circa* 1850–1910.

Today's Deoghar district, a sub-division of the Santhal Parganas in those days, lay in what O'Malley described as the "*rolling country containing long ridges with intervening depressions, in places rocky and in places covered with scrub jungle*". Even today, to the north of Deoghar town, one can observe the highly degraded rocky, scrubby terrain of the area that stretches almost 100 kms in a west to east direction and 20-30 kms in a south to north direction. And I personally believe that this undulating rocky terrain to the north of Deoghar with its ridges and scrub forests would have been the abode of the Cheetahs in the Santhal Parganas. What further confirms my belief is the fact that all the Cheetah references from Santhal Parganas that I'm aware of mention just one name—Deoghar!

W.T. Blanford in his book *The Fauna Of British India Including Ceylon & Burma* published in 1888, writes:

"I once saw a skin that had been brought in by a local shikari at Deoghar, in the Santhal Pergunnahs, south of Bhagalpur" (Blanford 1888).

Edward B. Baker, though never saw one, wrote "It may occur in the Santhal Pergunnahs" (Edward 1886).

However, the most definitive and detailed account of Cheetahs of Deoghar comes from a book written by Edward Braddon, a British officer who served in Bengal during the mid-19th century spending a considerable number of years posted in Santhal Parganas. In his book *Thirty years of Shikar* published in 1895, he writes:

“Among the beasts of Deoghur jungles an occasional cheetah was to be found. In Oudh and other parts of India, this animal is domesticated and kept by sporting rajahs for the purpose of running down antelopes: in the Deoghur country they kept themselves by running down the goats and sheep of the people. A curious animal is this hunting cheetah — a cat (i.e. a small and much attenuated leopard) down to its feet, and at those extremities a dog. Twice in the course of my Deoghur career was I summoned forth from my cutcherry to shoot cheetahs. In both instances they had been imprisoned in a hut into which they had made their way after the goats of the hut-holder, and as to both I pursued the same tactics — that is to say, I rode gun in hand to the scene of action, from five to ten miles distant, climbed on the thatched roof that covered the cheetah, and made a hole in the thatch in view to shooting the spotted thief where it crouched below. In both instances, I failed of this purpose in consequence of the cheetah’s anticipation of my plans; for so soon as I had displaced enough of the roof to make a hole through which I could look into the interior, the cheetah came out by it, and springing to the ground went off. On the second occasion, when, forewarned by previous experience, I conducted my house-breaking with a more jealous care as to monopoly of my skylight, the cheetah was still too many for me, and, bounding out from off a beam upon which it lay, swept me before it nearly off my coign of vantage. The first cheetah I killed within a hundred yards of the hut; and second was less summarily disposed off. I missed it with my right barrel (fired before I had regained composure and equilibrium), and my second shot, although it went home, did not drop my quarry or stay its retreat into a small patch of bush and grass close by. There it was speedily found cowering in cover that failed to conceal it, but how was it to be finished off? I had brought no spare ammunition, for two shots seemed more than enough for a creature that I had reckoned upon killing inside the hut that had become its prison, and there was no weapon at hand, except the spear of a village watchman — a spear lacking the keenness of Ithuriel’s, a spear that, as to point and edge, was far less formidable than a ploughshare or the weaver’s shuttle. However, this was the sum-total of our available armoury, and I attacked the cheetah therewith. The active resistance of the beast was quantite negligeeable, but the passive hindrance offered by its slender and too lissome body constituted an insuperable obstacle to the spearing. I pinned the cheetah down with this rude halberd, so that an inch or two of its carcass only intervened between the spear-point and the ground, and yet was its skin unbroken by a prick of steel. The wretched animal had to be finished off with a heavy stake.” (Braddon 1895).

It’s worth noting here that Bradonn states that the shoots occurred “*five to ten miles distant*” from the “*cutcherry*” (anglicized Kachehri), which must have been Deoghar



A View of the Rocky, Scrubby and Undulating Terrain to the North of Deoghar

town; and the rocky scrubby terrain north of Deoghar which I believe would have been the Cheetah's habitat in the district lies almost exactly the same distance away from present day Deoghar town.

This account was published in 1895, decades after the actual incident. Braddon must have killed these Cheetahs *circa* 1860. Similarly Blanford's account was published in 1888, while that of Baker in 1886. Clearly, the dates add up — all the Cheetah references from Deoghar date to mid 19th century, there are no mention of Cheetahs from Deoghar post *circa* 1865–1870. The two district gazetteers of Santhal Parganas published in 1877 and 1910 make no mention of the Cheetah among the fauna of the district; infact almost all the other major mammals of the area had also gone extinct by 1910. So, we can confidently conclude that the last of the Cheetahs disappeared from Santhal Parganas *circa* 1860–1865.

Uptil now, the Santhal Parganas is considered to be the easternmost limit of the Asiatic Cheetah's historical range. However, during my research I have come across a new reference that challenges this conclusion, and might actually extend Asiatic Cheetah's historical easternmost limit to as close as 20 kms from the Bangladesh border! (See Appendix I – Cheetahs in West Bengal!: Asiatic Cheetah's historical range extended?)