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KAZIRANGA ELEPHANT FESTIVAL - 2006



The Demise of the Lesser Indian Rhinoceros

Dr Kees Rookmaaker

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In the nineteenth century it was common practice to discuss both the Great Indian Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) and the Lesser Indian Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*). The name has stuck for the first species, but the second one is now usually called Javan Rhinoceros from the island where it was first described. The two species are very similar in appearance, both being single-horned, but the first is larger than the second. They are well differentiated, but when only glimpsed for a minute in the field, mistakes are easily made. Hence it is always possible that written records for these species, unaccompanied by a skull or a photograph, are confused. Historians, quite rightly, tend to err on the safe side, but it means that there may be more reports of the Lesser Indian Rhinoceros than we can now deduce from the scanty historical record.

Rhinoceros sondaicus is the only rhinoceros ever seen in the Sundarbans of India and Bangladesh (Rookmaaker 1997). Its presence is only known from a few reports, which fortunately are clear enough to ensure that it was this species which once roamed these estuarine forests. Edward Baker must have been one of the luckiest persons, because when he was hunting, probably around 1850, he saw 'on the margin of a mud-hole twenty or thirty feet in diameter stood a huge rhinoceros in deep contemplation of two shapeless slate-coloured lumps just showing above the muddy water; in other words, two companions enjoying a mud-bath' (Baker 1887). He also saw a rhino on the banks of the Pealee (Piali) River, about six miles from Barrapoor (Baruipur), just south of the great city of Calcutta. It was a 'huge bull rhinoceros' and disappeared into the jungle before it could be obtained.

Because *Rhinoceros sondaicus* was known both in the Sundarbans and in Burma (Myanmar), one would expect to find it again in territories linking these populations (Rookmaaker 2002). It might have existed in Chittagong (Pollok 1879), but there are no definite records confirming this, as all rhinos known from this region have been two-horned animals – and thus supposedly Sumatran rhinos (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*). Rhinos were seen in the Cachar Hills of Assam, but none have been identified as *R. sondaicus*.

Further north, a Javan Rhinoceros was shot near Sylhet, now in North-Eastern Bangladesh, by a tea-planter called Gordon Fraser on an unknown date (Wood 1930). Reports of rhinos in Manipur refer to one-horned animals, probably *R. sondaicus*. Higgins (1935)

in 1913 saw a skull of one shot on the Khuga Liver and heard that a few had been killed in the lower valley of the Barak River, near Tipaimukh, but he was unable to verify the identification himself. In 1874, a young one-horned rhinoceros caught in 'Mooneypoor' (Manipur) was shipped from Calcutta to London, where it was bought by the Berlin Zoo. This animal was identified as *R. sondaicus* at first when staying in London, but later in life different people mentioned it as either *R. sondaicus* or *R. unicornis* and even as a new species called *R. jamrachii* (Rookmaaker 1983). This historical riddle may never be satisfactorily solved as the remains of the animal were not preserved when she died in 1884.

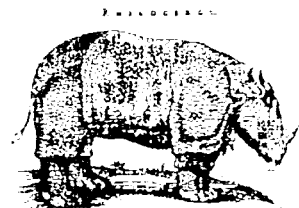
There are three known records of the Javan Rhinoceros in the northern part of West Bengal and adjoining districts, which may be surprising as the area is now only inhabited by the Great Indian rhinoceros. The first is found in the authoritative Fauna of British India, where Blanford (1888) mentioned that a certain specimen of *R. sondaicus* was shot in the Sikkim terai by Kinloch. Maybe rumours had been distorted, because Kinloch (1892) himself wrote about shooting *R. unicornis* in Bengal in 1878 and 1886, and would certainly have referred to *R. sondaicus* if he had seen it there. However, later in life, Kinloch (1904: 65) mentioned that the Javan rhinoceros existed in the Bhutan Duars 'where I once saw one shot by a friend.' Another specimen was shot by J.A. Møller from Denmark at Moraghat, in the Jalpaiguri district of northern West Bengal on 24 February 1881. The skull of this young female is still preserved in the Zoological Museum of Copenhagen. Finally, Shebbeare (1953) related that J.W.A. Grieve killed one early in the 20th century in the Buxa Forest Division, thinking that it was a small *R. unicornis*, but recognized it as a Javan rhinoceros when it was mounted by the firm of Rowland Ward in London. One thing makes me wonder. The Maharajah of Cooch Behar (1908) gives details how he killed 135 and injured 34 rhinos in his district between 1871 and 1904 - and none of them were identified as *R. sondaicus*.

Despite the paucity of records, there is no doubt that both the Great and the Lesser Indian Rhinoceroses were once part of the fauna of the Indian subcontinent. It is a pity that the smaller species

has not survived in its former haunts. Protection came too late for these animals to survive into the 21st century. Hopefully, the Great Indian Rhinoceros will continue to prosper in the great reserves of North-East India and elsewhere.

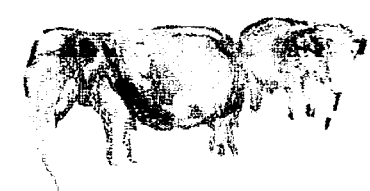
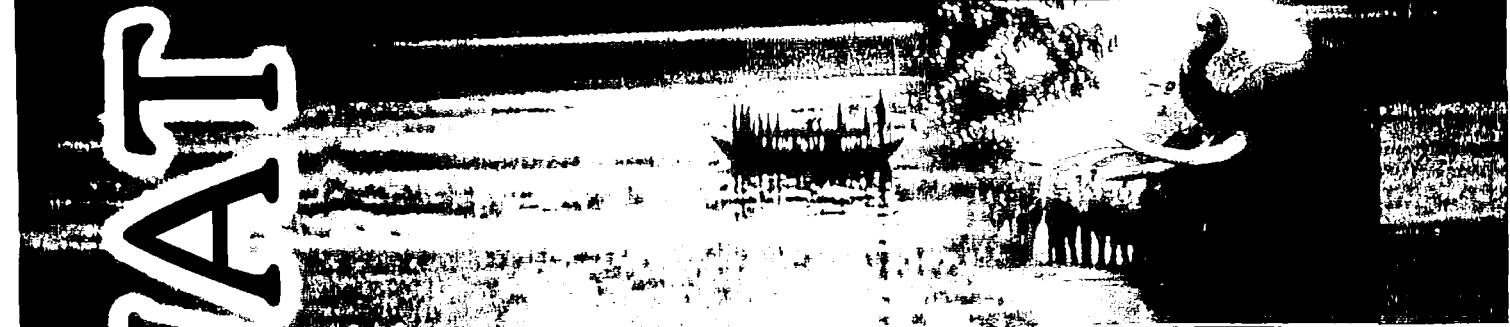
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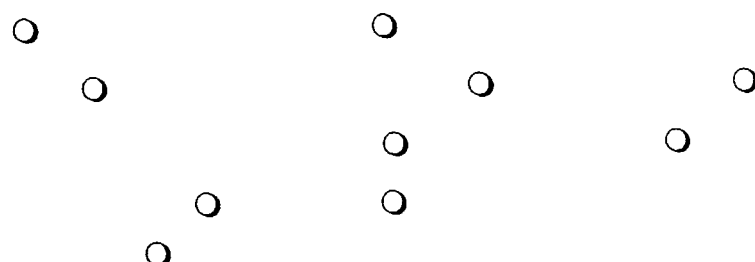
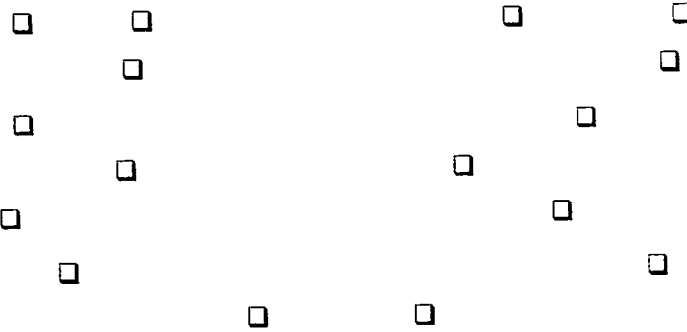
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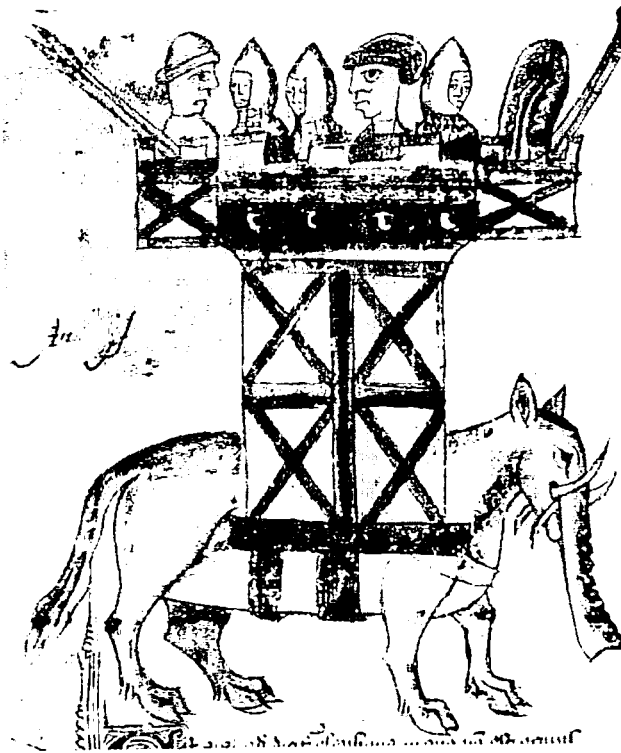
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