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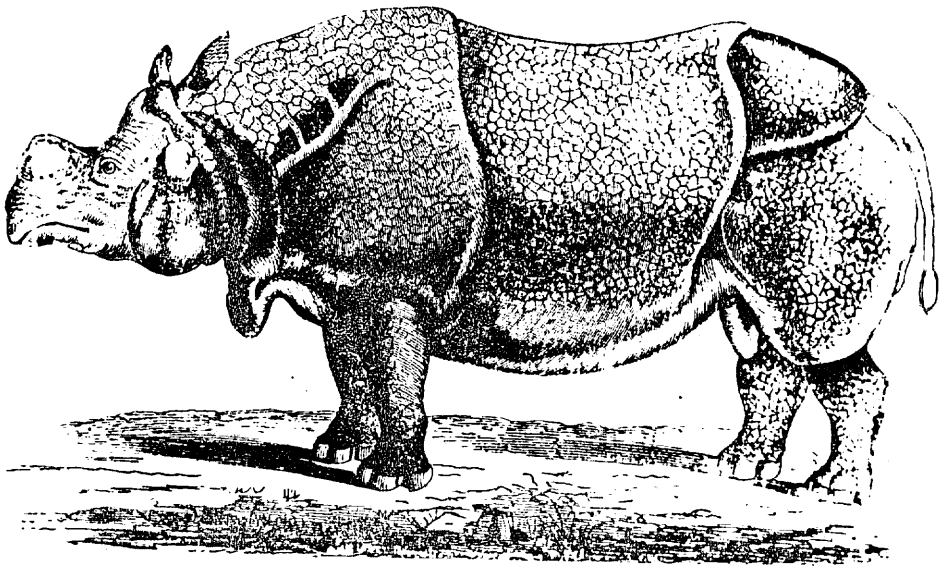

*Rhinoceros unicornis*

## THE RHINO – MARTYR TO SUPERSTITION

*by Sumati*

Who says conservation measures don't work? If the planning is sincere and the eye watchful, wildlife sanctuaries might hope to duplicate the success of the Kaziranga rhino sanctuary in Assam. From a mere dozen animals at the beginning of this century, the rhino population there is now teeming with around 700 animals. It is indeed very heartening, if we also consider that, next to the giraffe-like okapi of Africa, the rhino is the most expensive animal in the world today. In India, a zoo wishing to buy a rhino must pay about Rs. 100,000; a zoo abroad must pay twice as much.

Actually, left to itself, the rhino would have few survival problems. It has few natural enemies. No predator dares attack a full-grown rhino or, for that matter, even a calf that is being guarded by its mother. And rhinos don't, seek out and attack man; rather, contrary to popular stories, when confronted, they usually prefer to rush for cover. And the rhinos rarely raid cultivated fields.

Again, left to itself...but the rhino is not left to itself. For, despite science and the so-called growing scientific attitude, no one has yet found a way to do away with superstitions.

Truly, the rhino is a martyr to superstitions, superstitions built around its horn. The rhino horn is literally worth more than its weight in gold. And it's not even a horn proper – just an epidermal outgrowth of agglutinated hair, Yet, the halo of magical properties surrounding it never seems to dim. The shavings are supposed to cure spasms in young children. Kept under the bed, it is said to ease labour during childbirth. Horn power mixed with coconut oil is said to shrink lumps, stop bleeding, soothe irritation and cure several other ailments. Rings made of the horn are said to cure piles. Some believe, a chip of the horn worn as a charm is a fail-proof talisman. And, in Europe, Popes and Kings kept cups made of rhino horns to test if their drinks were poisoned: it was believed, if poisoned, the drink would froth and even split the cup. But it is the rhino horn's supposed aphrodisiac property (in Chinese and South-East Asian pharmacopoeias) that has led to its mass slaughter – even after conservation measures were initiated. While studying the status of the Asian rhino (in 1955), Lee Merrian Talbot came across people in South East Asia who were willing to pay as much as Rs. 20,000 for a single horn. In Sumatra, he met a merchant who was ready to part with his new American automobile in exchange for a rhino.

And the halo of magic appears to have spread even beyond the mystical horn. Practically every part of the animal has been coveted. Its skin was used to make supposedly impenetrable shields. The urine was believed to be an antiseptic; and when hung in a container at the entrance of the house, it was believed to ward off evil. Apothecaries made potions from it to cure all skin diseases. Why, even now, it is sold at the Gauhati Zoo. The dry meat when chewed was said to induce immunity against dysentery.

In fact, the range of the superstitions surrounding the rhino is astounding. In Nepal, Burma, Malaysia and Thailand– the belief persisted that a sprinkle of rhino blood ensured a dying soul's happy journey. Hence, when

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poachers killed the animal, they plugged the bullet holes and collected the blood. Even blood-soaked paper fetched a price. If a gravid female rhino was killed, there was great rejoicing as the fetus was a highly valued item on the eastern apothecaries' list. A small piece of rhino bone sewn into the arm was believed to make the person as strong as the animal. Many hill tribes still bury a rhino bone in fields to ensure a good harvest. Soup made from the umbilical stump, it was said, cured rheumatic and arthritic complaints. And, to top it all, in Nepal, rhino flesh and blood used to be a prize offering to the gods.

How the myths originated, nobody knows, It could be, wrote the late E.P. Gee, that the unicorn tales might have originated from the Indian rhino. Or, could it be the other way around? The mythical unicorn was believed to have used its horn to detect poison in liquids by dipping it into them.' Yet, most of these claimed properties, when tested, have been found to be baseless. Poisons have been poured into rhino horn cups and none cracked. And biochemical tests carried out in Basle (Switzerland) disproved the most acclaimed aphrodisiac properties. Yet the slaughter goes on – by poachers who wouldn't hesitate shooting forest guards, too – and the horns eventually find their way to China and South-East Asia.

Rhinos (or their ancestors – the rhino family is nearly 60 million years old) were found over Asia, Europe, Africa and North America. Many of them were weeded out in the process of evoultion. Today, five main lines survive, two in Africa and three in Asia, in small pockets of their original range. All of them belong to one family, the Rhinocerotidae. The typical family characteristics are massive, barrel-like build, thick and solid bones, and short, stumpy legs with three toes. The rhinos, along with the horse family and the tapirs, belong to the order Perissodactyla, the odd-toed ungulates (hoofed animals). Though outwardly similiar, all living rhino species differ from one another in structure, possibly due to environmental adaptation a long time back.

The two African species – the black rhino *(Diceros bicornis)*, and the white rhino *(Diceros (Ceratotherium) simus)* – are quite numerous. The Asiatic species, especially the Javan rhino *(Rhinoceros sondaica)* and the Sumatran species *(Dicerohinus (Didermocerus) sumatrensis)* is relatively safe in its habitats in Assam and West Bengal in India, and in Nepal. It has also been reported that a few of the Nepali animals have strayed into Bihar. All three Asian species were once found in India. The Javan rhino died out in India at the turn of the century, while the Sumatran rhino lingered on until the 1930's. Now only *R. unicornis* exists in India.

At one time the range of *R. unicornis* extended all over the Himalayan foothills – from the Siwaliks across the Indo-Gangetic region to the east. In the western part of its range, Babur had hunted it on the Kashmir frontier. As late as 1554, it was even found west of the Kotal Pass in the western Himalayas. In mid-19th century, it was still found as far west as Rohilkhand in Uttar Pradesh. Then its territory began to shrink because of habitat destruction by the growing human population. Just about 25 years ago, rhinos were found in Purnea district in Bihar, the Kosi river project finished these off. In North Bengal and Assam, rhinolands were converted to fields and tea estates. As their numbers decreased, the value of the horns shot up and the earlier hunting for sport and meat was replaced by poaching.

The first alarm about the dwindling rhino numbers was sounded in 1904 when the rhino population had slumped to just about a dozen. The Kaziranga game reserve in Assam was set up in 1908 and the numbers were slowly built up. Nearly 700 of the 1,000 Indian rhinos alive today are to be found in Kaziranga (now made into a National Park measuring 37,822 hectares). The rest are found in scattered parts of Assam, in the Jaldapara sanctuary in North Bengal and the Chitwan National Park in Nepal.

During the rains, the Kaziranga rhinos migrate to the Mikir Hills south of the sanctuary and this is the time the poachers move in. Ever since the security measures were tightened in Kaziranga, the poachers prefer the Char Island at Orang in the Brahmaputra, Barasal, Burchapur and another island in Kurua all marshy swamps where rhinos find a natural home. After they kill the animal, they just hack off the horn, their prize.

Despite strict vigilance, poaching hasn't stopped. And, being heavily armed, poachers have killed a number of forest guards. Recently, a new anti-poaching tool has been introduced – radio surveillance. The World Wildlife Fund has donated the radio-tracking device to the Kaziranga National Park. During recent trials, two poachers (who had been digging pits to trap rhinos) were caught red-handed.

With luck, poaching may be completely stopped, but there is still another threat – disease. Some naturalists suggest that the only way to save the rhino from extinction due to epidemics would be to establish sanctuaries farther away but within the original range of the rhino. Others suggest places like the Periyar in Kerala and Mudhumalai in Tamil Nadu (adaptation may not be a problem; fossils of the rhino have been found near the Narmada and in Tamil Nadu).

As regards the sale of the rhino horns (from dead animals – on an average about 15 rhinos die of natural causes a year) by the Assam Government, some naturalists argue that such a practice will only go to further consolidate the harmful superstitions and should be done away with.

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