

kaziranga

the rhino century

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THE STORY OF NIGONA SHIKARI

All big success stories have a small beginning. And so it is with Kaziranga National Park now acknowledged the world over as the one of the 20th century's greatest conservation success stories.

It all began with a persuasive local wildlife enthusiast Bapiram Hazarika, more popularly known as Nigona *shikari*. Had it not been for his courage of conviction, Kaziranga National Park, famous for its large concentration of the one-horned rhino may not have come into existence at all. Although Lady Mary Victoria Leiter Curzon is often credited with having told her husband, Lord George Curzon, the then Viceroy of British India to take urgent steps to conserve the rhino, it was essentially Nigona *shikari* who actually convinced Lady Curzon about the existence of the great one-horned Indian rhino in the forest which we today know as Kaziranaga National Park.

Kaziranga National Park, which completes 100 years of its existence in February 2005, is today regarded as one of the most stunning conservation success stories anywhere

in the world. It's USP is the one-horned rhino, now numbering over 1700 but the park also has a wider variety of flora and fauna not seen together elsewhere on this planet. The World Heritage Site tag that it has earned is therefore well-deserved but the origins of the Park is a story by itself.

It dates back to the first decade of the 1900s when tea gardens were springing up all over Assam. One such garden—Naharjan—was located close to the present-day Kaziranga National Park. This garden was managed by a gentleman called Mr Forbes who was perhaps distantly related to Lady and Lord Curzon and was a honorary magistrate of the area that was then called Nam-Doyang.

In the January of 1905, Lady Curzon, during her trip to Assam was particularly interested in visiting Naharjan tea estate since she had heard from Forbes that it was possible to see a wide variety of wildlife that existed in abundance in that area. One fine morning, Forbes arranged for three elephants for Lady



Curzon and her entourage to go around the area. He also called for Nigona *shikari* to accompany the distinguished visitor.

Forbes had several reasons to call Nigona *shikari* as a guide. A self-taught, wizened naturalist, who was not necessarily a *shikari* but was called so because he knew the jungles inside out, Nigona, a resident of Bosagaon was also a very good mahout. As the party set out for the wild from Mr Forbes' bungalow, Nigona took charge as the mahout of the elephant that was carrying the lady VVIP. Nigona obviously did not know English but that apparently was not



Lady Curzon

a constraint as he set about explaining the finer points of the jungle and the wildlife to Lady Curzon as Mr Forbes acted as the interpreter.

As they went deeper into the forest, Nigona spotted a rhino at a distance and excitedly pointed it out to Lady Curzon. She however did not believe him and insisted that it was a wild buffalo.

“No, it is a rhino,” countered Nigona. Forbes, who had full confidence in Nigona’s knowledge of wildlife, ordered the elephants to be taken closer to the animal. But by the time the party arrived at the spot, the animal had already disappeared into the thicket. Not being able to see anything, Lady Curzon refused to believe Nigona’s contention that it was a rhino.

Nigona *shikari* would however not be put down so easily. He brought the elephants to a halt, got down and inspected the undergrowth as Lady Curzon and Mr Forbes watched fascinated. Minutes later, Nigona beckoned the visitors to take a look at something. As they descended from the makeshift *howdah*, Nigona pointed out a series of fresh pug marks which distinctly had three toes on each foot.

He then showed her and Forbes the feet of the elephant which clearly have four toes. Convinced that she had indeed seen the rare sight of a rhino in the wild, Lady Curzon then bombarded Nigona with many queries about rhinos and their habitat. This was Nigona's chance to display his knowledge about the rhinos and concern about their indiscriminate killings, mostly by white hunters. "How can we save this wonderful animal?" asked the Vicereine.

Nigona had a simple solution. "Stop the sahibs from killing them," he told Lady Curzon, who on her return to Calcutta, pressed her all-powerful husband to issue orders that would prohibit the hunting of rhinos in Assam. This story



A typical tea garden in Assam.

was recounted to us by Lila Nath, now a respected hotelier, and former chairman of the Bokakhat Town Committee, who is a storehouse of information as far as Kaziranga is concerned, since, as he claims, "I was born in a village that has now become part of Kaziranga National Park. I have virtually grown up with the Park." Nath, who in his youth worked at the Naharjan Tea estate, heard the story of Nigona *shikari* from successors of Mr Forbes, the planter who had hosted Lady Curzon during her short trip to Kaziranga.

Nath, also a renowned *shikari* in his younger days, has killed three man-eating tigers and five rouge elephants in the vicinity of the Park and like the little-known Nigona *shikari* has all the information about Kaziranga on his fingertips. But for this vital information provided by Nath, Nigona *shikari*'s contribution to establishment of the Kaziranga Reserve Forest, would have gone totally unacknowledged.

Despite Lady Curzon's urgings to her husband and the efforts of some well-meaning British officers, it took another six months for the government to issue a notification declaring an area of 57,273.60 acres of forests, close to Naharjan as the Kaziranga Proposed Reserve Forest.



Of course, it was not as if the authorities did not know about the existence of the rhino. Records show that the officiating Commissioner of the Assam Valley, JC Arbuthnott was very concerned about the dwindling number of rhinos, thanks to “yearly incursions of large shooting parties from Bengal.” Arbuthnott had in fact written to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to stop unchecked poaching as early as in 1902. Though the Chief Commissioner “gladly considered the possibility of establishing an asylum for the rhinoceros in Assam,” it was not until the persuasive Lady Curzon prevailed upon her husband that the government woke up to the need of saving the rhino. By that time, as records show now, the number of rhinos in the wilds of Assam had drastically gone down to a mere dozen or so.

There were reasons why the rhinos in particular and wildlife in general had been decimated in Assam at the turn of the 20th century. As Arup Kumar Dutta in his widely-acclaimed book *Unicornis: The Great Indian One-Horned Rhinoceros* says: “The discovery of the indigenous tea plant in Assam in the beginning of the 19th century sounded the death knell for its faunal wealth. Large areas of virgin jungles were cleared for setting up tea plantations



and the wildlife habitats began to shrink. At the turn of the century the railway line into Assam was constructed, and hordes of



The big five of Kaziranga

migrant settlers and labourers colonised the Brahmaputra Valley. European tea planters joined hands with local *shikaris* in decimating animals in large numbers. Records also show that large numbers of rhinos had to be killed when the North Trunk Road was built. Gradually, wildlife began to disappear from the valley...In the beginning of this (20th) century the realisation suddenly dawned on the British authorities that less than a dozen of this species remained in the valley.”

This sudden concern, coupled with Nigona *shikari*'s fortuitous encounter with Lady Curzon was the turning point not just for the one-horned rhino but also for hundreds

of other species of wildlife that we today see in Kaziranga National Park. How the name Kaziranga, like names of most other famous places, came to be used, have at least two interesting theories.

Debeswar Saikia, noted social worker of the locality, who died at the age of 103 in 2001. in his book *Kaziranga Buniyad* talks about a *beel* (horse-shoe lake created by changes in water channels and depressions) that runs parallel to the present-day National Highway 37 which was locally known as Kaziranga. The meaning of Kaziranga has its roots in the language of the Karbi tribe that inhabits the hills overlooking the Park. According to Saikia, once upon a time,



these hills were full of wild goats which used to trek down to the beel to drink water. In the Karbi language, wild goats are known as *karjo* and a river or stream is known as *longso*. The combination of these two words—*karjo* and *longso* were used to mean the *beel* where the wild goats from the



hills drank water. Over the years, this word, *karjolongso* got corrupted to become present day Kaziranga.

Kanak Kunja Bora, another local resident, who has recently retired from government service and lives near the Park. has written several booklets on the history and origins of the Kaziranga National Park, has interesting take on how the name Kaziranga came about. This one dates back to last decade of the 17th century when Rudra Simha, the 30th Ahom King was ruling Assam. (The Ahoms, who have their roots in Thailand, came to Assam through the Shan Province of Burma, and ruled Assam from 1228 to 1826 until the kingdom was annexed to British India.)



Rudra Simha, who ascended the throne in 1696, was on his way to Guwahati when he stopped over at the local chieftain Ranjit Phukan's house for a night halt. During his stay, the king was highly impressed by the weaving skills of Phukan's daughter Kamala and asked her to make a jacket of silk for himself. The highly-skilled daughter wove the jacket overnight, much to the delight of the king who described her as a *kazi* (expert in work) woman. Pleased with her efforts, Rudra Simha rewarded her and her husband Rongai with a plot of land nearby. The locals then started referring to this land as the one belonging to Kazi and Rongai which later got shortened to *Kazirongai* and subsequently as Kaziranga.

Another legend that is heard around Kaziranga refers to a couple Kazi and Rongai who were childless several years after marriage. The couple tried all kinds of traditional medicines and other religious and spiritual means to get a child but to no avail. Once it so happened that Madhavadeva, the principal disciple of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva, the saint and social reformer of medieval Assam, was passing through the area. The couple approached him in a hope that he could suggest a remedy for their problem and ensure that their family tree would continue. Madhavadeva heard their problem patiently and apparently said: "Is a child the only way to ensure that your name is known



for generations? There are definitely other means to perpetuate your legacy. Why don't you dig a big pond in this area which will be of use to everyone?" The couple immediately agreed and put Madhavadeva's suggestion into practice. Later the then Ahom king Swargadeo Pratap Simha was passing by the area when the local chieftain offered him fish. The king, who liked the taste of the fish, enquired where it came from. Then he was told that it came from the pond that was dug by Kazi and Rongai. Thus the area where the pond of Kazi and Rongai was located soon came to be known as Kaziranga.

Whatever the origins of the name, Kaziranga is Kaziranga. For a century now, it has stood witness to man's untiring efforts to conserve nature and preserve one of the most delicate bio-diversity spots anywhere in the world. Kaziranga now just doesn't belong to the descendents of Kazi and Rongai. Neither does it belong to the wild goats of the Karbi Hills. It is now a World Heritage Site that belongs to the entire population of this planet.



If Brahma is known as the creator of the Universe, then his son, the Brahmaputra, the mighty river that crisscrosses through Assam can rightly be called the creator of Kaziranga. As the river Brahmaputra, which originates in the Mansarovar in the high altitudes of Tibet, comes down into Assam through the eastern Himalayas, it brings down large deposits of silt with its mighty current. What Kaziranga is today was perhaps once the main channel of the red river which habitually changed its course over the century due to earthquakes at various points of time.

This volatile movement of the river is surely responsible for the heavy deposition of silt and the simultaneous formation of beels of various lengths and depths in this area. The landmasses formed by the heavy deposition of silt in this riverine area thus gradually stabilised with the natural growth of saccharum and other grass species. At the same time, the swift and unpredictable river still erodes a large portion of the land mass, particularly in those areas where bigger trees have not yet sprung up. Those who have observed Kaziranga over the past few decades have

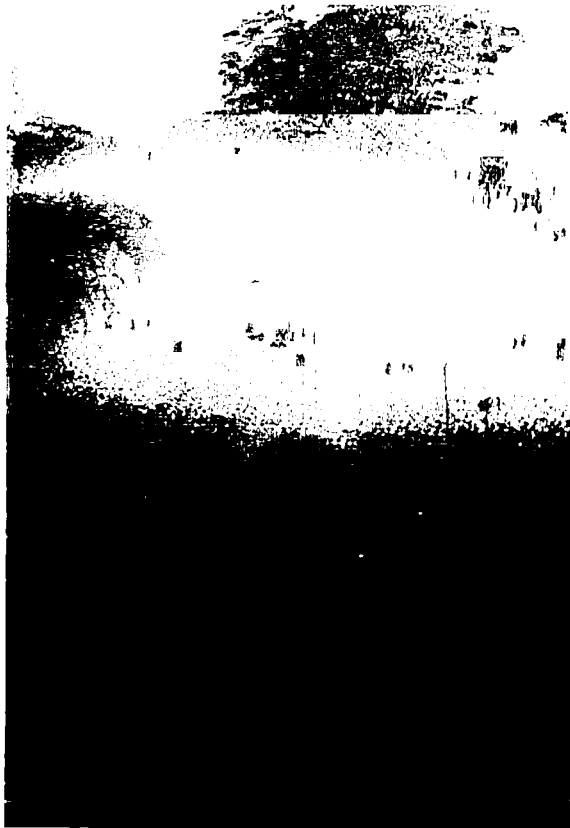
witnessed this on-going process of erosion and deposition of silt on the northern boundary of the park which is the Brahmaputra river itself.

The Kaziranga National Park, whose area has gone up from the originally notified area of 428.7 sq km to the current 860 sq km today lies between Latitude 26.04 N and 26.46 N and Longitude 93.08 E and 93.36 E. The terrain of the



park is by and large flat with a gentle and almost imperceptible slope from east to west as also from north to south.

Since the area falls under a heavy rainfall zone, the mean annual rainfall between 1993 and 2003 has been 1881 mm. The rainfall is at its heaviest in the months from May to September which is also the flood season in the region,



compelling the authorities to keep the Park closed for visitors for nearly six months of the year. Therefore, the best time to visit the Park is from November to May since the rains are scanty and the temperatures are pleasant. In December and January the minimum temperature is

known to have gone down up to 11 degrees Celsius, often remaining enveloped in dense fog during night and early morning.

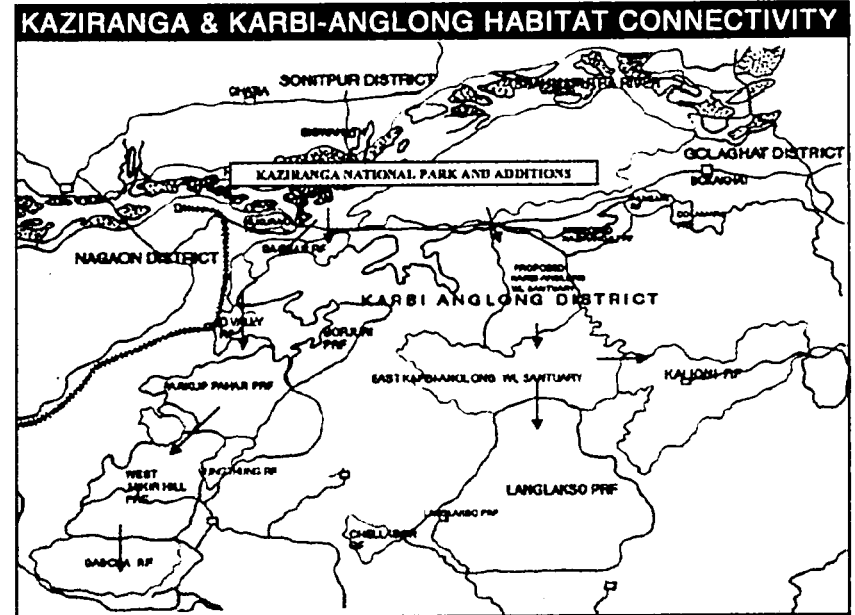
Scientific studies have shown that the area under Kaziranga National Park primarily consists of recent composite alluvial plains and flood plains. In an extensively researched *Future Management Plan*, Niranjana Kumar Vasu, the current director of the Kaziranga National Park has given a detailed account of the geology of the area. "Lithologically, the Kaziranga formation is represented by grey silt and fine to medium sands which form the recent composite flood plain with numerous meander scars and scrolls, palaeochannels and abandoned channels of the Kaziranga unit belonging to the Holocene period of quaternary ages (which in other words means 'the most recent geological period during which modern human beings appeared and civilisation began'). The soil overlying the sandy deposits at places is very deep while at some places it is of very recent origin consisting mainly of sand, devoid of any humus or decomposed organic matter. As such, the soil at various places varies from sandy soil, sandy loam, clayey loam to purely clayey soil."

Those who have visited the Park frequently and extensively have noticed that the area is swampy and criss-crossed by a number of channels that originate from the Brahmaputra

and flow out to it again. As a combined result of this criss-crossing, earthquakes and silt deposits that come down from Eastern Himalayas, Kaziranga is blessed with a number of permanent water bodies locally known as *beels*. The Brahmaputra itself follows a braiding pattern that has created numerous islands which are locally called *chars* and *chaporis*.

Given its climate and terrain, Kaziranga is regarded as the largest undivided flood-plain grassland and forest area of the Brahmaputra Valley. As much as 64 per cent of the original Kaziranga National Park area is grassland, while seven to eight per cent comprises various water bodies like beels and river channels. The rest, which is nearly 28 per cent, is covered with woodland. The physical features of Kaziranga National Park apart, it also falls in the junction of the Australasia Flyway and the Indo-Asian Flyway thus adding to the rich diversity in avi-faunal species. According to noted ornithologist Anwaruddin Choudhury, Kaziranga is among the most important wintering grounds in the world for Bar-headed Goose and Ferruginous Duck, of which the latter species is considered rare all over its range.

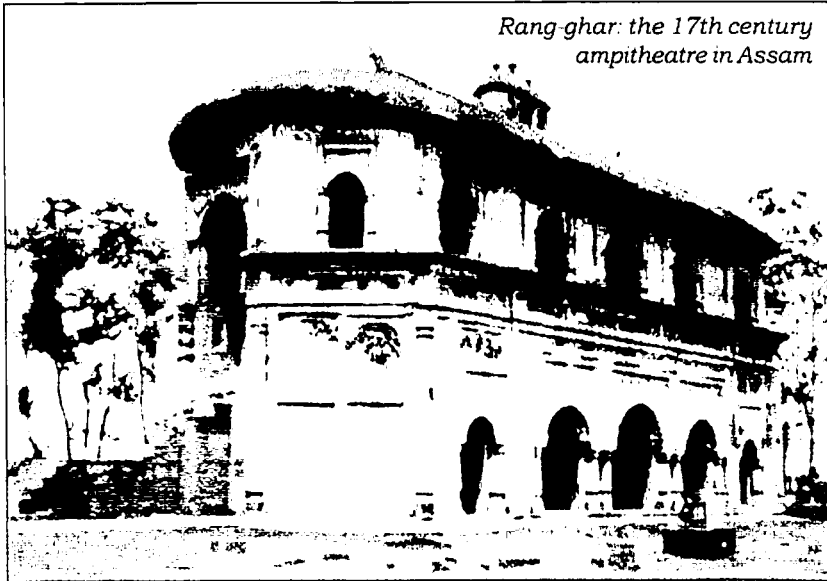
Historically however, this area is bounded by the Brahmaputra on the north, river Kaliyani on the east, Karbi Anglong hills on the south and Koliabor in the west, used



to be part of Khagorijan district of the Ahom kingdom till 1826. The eastern portion of present day Kaziranga was better known as Moriyahola and the western part as Bhogdwar. This area was an important transit post of the Ahoms whose messengers used to travel from Sivasagar to Guwahati and back, while an important officer of the naval wing used to operate from here. There was a reason for a naval officer to be posted here of course. Kaziranga, before the devastating earthquake of 1897 used to be at the confluence of two big rivers—Dihing and Luit—while the downstream portion was called Borno (big river), which we now know as the Brahmaputra.



When the British annexed Assam in 1826 following the Yandaboo Treaty with the Burmese who had earlier occupied large portions of the Ahom kingdom, they readjusted the boundaries and included this area in the newly-created Sibsagar district. In the new dispensation, the present-day Kaziranga then came to be known as Nam-Doyang. As tea was 'discovered' in 1836 (though it was already growing naturally in Assam and was being consumed by the local people), the British threw open the area for tea plantations resulting in large-scale destruction of forests. Some tea gardens that came up in the area are Hathikuli, Methoni, Difloo, Naharjan, Ekrajan, Borchapori and Behora. All these gardens, although owned by different companies, are now inseparable from Kaziranga. The late



*Rang-ghar: the 17th century
amphitheatre in Assam*

Forbes, who hosted Lady Curzon's landmark visit in January 1905, was in fact manager of the Naharajan tea estate that still exists close to the Park.

One of the earliest references about Kaziranga can be found in a book authored by a Britisher way back in 1800. Dr John Peter Wade, a surgeon attached to the first British military contingent that was despatched to help the Ahoms fight the Burmese invaders, writes in his book *An Account of Assam*, first published in 1800: "Kaziranga lies to the east and south-east of Rungulighur; and Namdoyungh to the eastward above Khonarmook or Sonarmook, the country here is low, and subject to inundation. It extends about six miles in length, from the causeway to Bassa, and four in breadth to the foot of the mountains from Namdoyungh."

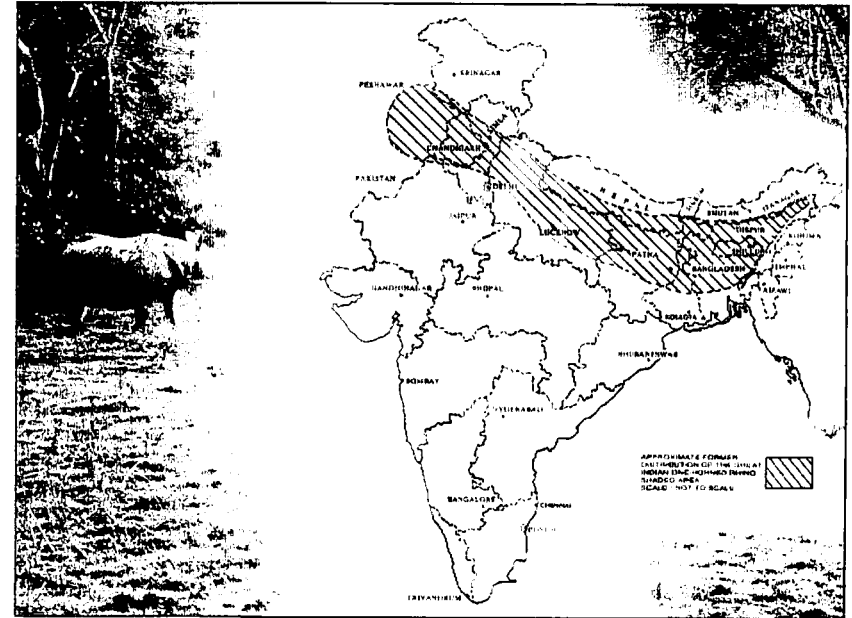
Montgomery Martin in his book *Studies in Indian History* published in 1838 spells Kaziranga as Casirunga and repeats what Dr Wade had said 38 years before him: "Casirunga lies to the east and south-east on Rungulighur and Namdoyungh to the eastward above Khonarmook or Sonarmkooh, the country here is low and subject to inundation. It extends about six miles in length, from the causeway to Bassa, and four in breadth to the foot of the mountains from Namdoyungh." There is however no mention of wildlife or a rhino in Martin's book.

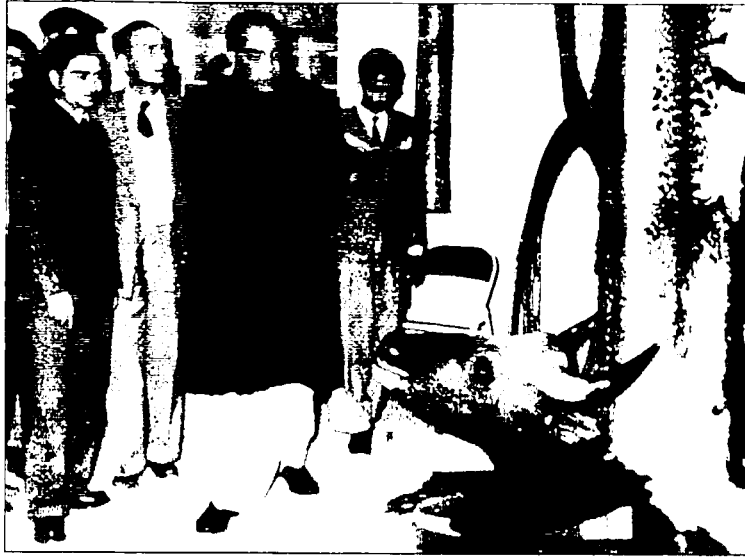
FROM RESERVE FOREST TO NATIONAL PARK

It was on February 24, 1826 that the Assam Valley formally came under the East India Company in the wake of the Yandaboo Treaty signed between the British and the Burmese invaders. The Valley was quite sparsely populated especially after about one-third of the population was decimated by the Burmese incursions, and mostly covered with thick grass and jungle. As the tea industry came up in a big way, these jungles were rapidly cleared. Tea was soon followed by laying of the railway lines and discovery of oil, with which hordes of settlers and graziers came into the valley. "Wildlife gradually became scarcer, and in particular the rhino was very much hunted by sportsman and poachers alike." (EP Gee, *The Wildlife of India*, 1964)

Documents accessed from the Assam Secretariat proceedings of that period show that this concern was first officially expressed by JC Arbuthnott, Officiating Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts who wrote to the then Chief Commissioner of Assam on November 4, 1902 saying, "The animal which was formerly common in

Assam, has been exterminated except in remote localities at the foot of the Bhutan Hills in Kamrup and Goalpara and in a very narrow tract of country between the Brahmaputra and the Mikir Hills in Nowgong and Golaghat where a few individuals still exist." This 'narrow tract' that Arbuthnott refers to in his above letter is clearly today's Kaziranga area.





Assam chief minister BP Chaliha inspecting some seized items in the 1960s

Arbuthnott, who must have toured the area extensively, described the rhino as “an interesting animal” and said that its extinction in Kamrup and Goalpara “has been hastened within the last 5 years by the yearly incursions of large shooting parties from Bengal, which has led to the reckless and indiscriminate destruction of all game.”

Arbuthnott further wrote in his long letter to the Chief Commissioner: “It is inevitable that such parties (from Bengal) should include novices who fire at anything that gets up in front of them. In the case of rhinoceros the slaughter of females and immature animals has brought the species to the verge of extinction. There is, I think, still time to



preserve the very few that are left. I understand that the shooting of rhinoceros has been prohibited in Bengal. I would therefore suggest that the destruction of rhinoceros in Assam by shooting or by pitfalls be prohibited until further orders. I am convinced that, unless the order of the kind is issued, the complete extinction of a comparatively harmless and most interesting creature is only a question of a very short space of time. I trust therefore that the Chief Commissioner will see his way to take measures for the preservation of a species which is now verging on extinction before it is too late. An order prohibiting or limiting the destruction of rhinoceros without special permission would, I feel sure, be welcomed by all true lovers of sport and natural history. In my opinion however, it would be necessary to absolutely prohibit the destruction of the animal in certain tracts where it is still known to exist anyhow for a period of years.”

Interestingly, Arbuthnott was prompted to write this letter after the Chief Commissioner’s office, on October 18, 1902. had forwarded to him a letter written by the Honorary Secretary, Zoological Garden, Calcutta offering between Rs 500 and Rs 1000 for an adolescent rhinoceros. The Chief Commissioner took up the matter in right earnest as evident from the reply that his office gave to Arbuthnott on December 18, 1902. By that time Arbuthnott was already posted out to Sylhet as Deputy Commissioner. Yet, the

Chief Commissioner wrote to him there despite the fact that he (Arbuthnott) was no longer in charge of the Assam Valley.

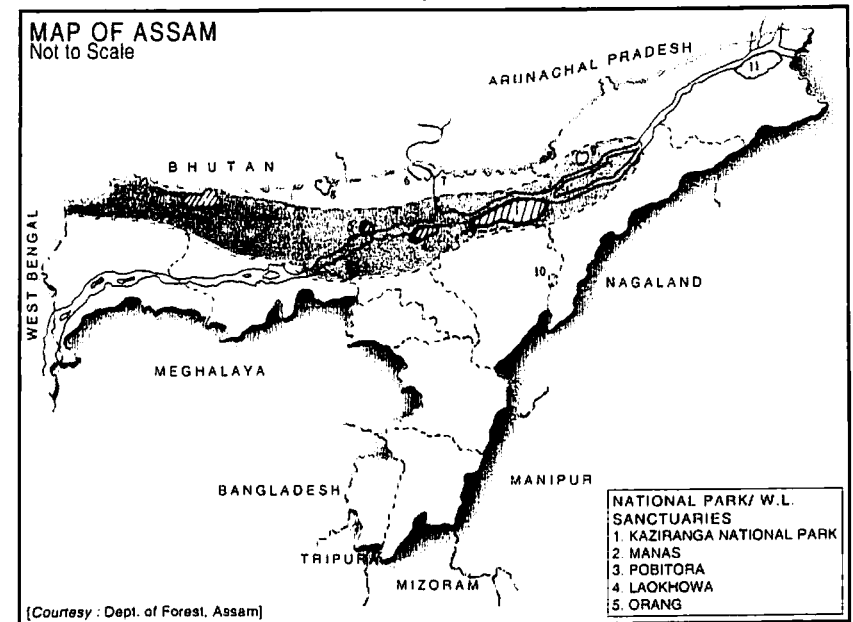
The letter from the Chief Commissioner's office said: "I am directed to say that the Chief Commissioner agrees with you in thinking that it would be most regrettable if the rhinoceros became extinct in Assam, but that it would be impossible without special legislation to penalise the unlicensed shooting of this animal, and that such legislation is not very likely to be undertaken. Mr Fuller (the Chief Commissioner) would, however, gladly consider the possibility of establishing an asylum for the rhinoceros by taking up as reserve forest a sufficient area of suitable land, and he would be glad to learn from you your opinion on this idea, and to receive any suggestions you may be able to give in regard to the locality and the area which should be selected. It would not be desirable that the formation of the reserve should prejudice the development of cultivation, but there must be extensive areas suitable as habitats for the rhinoceros which are quite unculturable."

Arbuthnott, who was perhaps encouraged by the Chief Commissioner's keenness to protect the rhino, spent about six months in identifying suitable habitats and wrote back on August 28, 1903 suggesting three specific areas. They were: a) The Bhutan foothills in north-west

Kamrup, b) the area west of Laokhowa and north of Juria in Nowgong and c) Between the Leterijan and the Brahmaputra Rivers in the Golaghat sub-division of Sibsagar "in the vicinity of Kaziranga."

Arbuthnott's identification of the areas in Bhutan foothills in Kamrup was specifically supported by Major PRT Gurdon who had already prepared a trace map of the locale and had put it up through proper channels for consideration.

It is pertinent to mention that the areas proposed by Arbuthnott and Major Gurdon did become protected habitats for rhinoceros in the later years. The areas in the then





north-west Kamrup bordering the Bhutan foothills that Major Gurdon and Arbuthnott refer to as early as in 1903 is definitely today's Manas National Park. Similarly, Laokhowa Wildlife Sanctuary in today's Nagaon district also had substantial rhino population while Kaziranga of course has the world's largest concentration of rhinos.

Intense exchange of correspondence on the subject between the Chief Commissioner's office and various Deputy Commissioner's of the districts concerned as well as the forest department continued for several months until December 22, 1904, when the Chief Commissioner's Office wrote to the Conservator of Forests informing him of the



much-awaited decision. The letter said: "I am directed to say that the Chief Commissioner has decided that the Kaziranga and Laokhowa Blocks may be created forest reserves in the interest of the preservation of game and that he would be glad if you will take early action towards procuring their notification. Meanwhile, they should be closed to shooting by executive orders."

By January 16, 1905, when the government offices reopened after a long winter vacation, the then Conservator of Forests, Assam, ES Carr submitted a draft notification to the Chief Commissioner's office regarding the proposed game reserve of Kaziranga.

Coincidentally Lady Mary Leiter Curzon was also touring Assam on a holiday and happened to chance upon a rhino from a distance as we said in an earlier chapter. As everyone is aware by now, she returned to Calcutta and persuaded her husband, Lord Curzon, the then Viceroy of India to expedite the decision to notify the reserve forest.

Lady Curzon's urgings to her husband had a desired effect and by June 1, 1905, the first formal notification (No. 2442 R) declaring the intention of the government to constitute Kaziranga as a reserved forest was issued by the Chief Commissioner of Assam. The proposed reserved forest was to have an approximate area of 57,273.6 acres spread over

three *mouzas* (Namdoyang and Kaziranga in the then Sibsagar district and Rangaloogarh in then Nowgong district). While the Divisional Forest Officer, Sibsagar was given the overall responsibility to manage the proposed Kaziranga reserved forest, the Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar was also appointed as Forest Settlement Officer to enquire into any rights claim over land that came under the area demarcated.

The notification described the boundaries of the proposed Kaziranga Reserve thus:

“North—The Mora Dhansiri from its junction with the



Garumarasuti to its junction with the Diphloo Nadi. Thence along the Diphloo Nadi to its junction with the Brahmaputra river. Thence along the Brahmaputra river from the mouth of the Diphloo Nadi to that of the Gutunga Nadi in a westerly direction.

West—From the mouth of the Gutunga Nadi up that river to the base of the Malni hill, along the western base of the Malni hill to the Sibsagar-Nowgong road.

South—Along the Sibsagar-Nowgong road to the Hattechooli Grant No. 14. Thence along the north-western boundary of the Grant to the Diphloo Nadi. Thence along the Diphloo Nadi to its junction with the Mathonee Jhora or Bibijia Jan. Thence in an easterly direction along the Bibijia Jan for a distance of 1 ½ miles.

East—From the Bibijia Jan in a direction due North to the Diphloo Nadi, a distance of about ¾ miles. Down the Diphloo Nadi for a distance of about 2 ¼ miles. Thence in a direction due north to the Garumarasuti, a distance of about ½ a mile, thence down the Garumarasuti to its junction with the Mora Dhansiri Nadi.”

Earlier, ES Carr, the Conservator of Forest, in his note dated September 20, 1904, to the Chief Commissioner had suggested





appointing two foresters at a salary of Rs 15 per month and two forest guards at a monthly salary of Rs 8 to man the proposed Kaziranga reserved forest. The annual expenses on salary for them would have thus been Rs 552.

However, the Chief Commissioner in his reply to ES Carr mentioned that he was not convinced that the proposed staff strength suggested by the Chief Conservator was sufficient for the protection of the reserved forest. "Efficient game-keeping is the essence of the scheme," said the Chief Commissioner's office and decided that Kaziranga would have one game keeper at a salary of Rs 35 per month, to be assisted by three instead of two forest guards as suggested by Carr. The



Chief Commissioner was willing to sanction an expenditure of Rs 800 annually, a healthy jump from a Carr's budget of Rs 552 per annum. One hundred years later, as Kaziranga grew in size and importance, its annual budget has also grown substantially.

At the time of this notification there were two temporary villages within this area whose inhabitants carried out *paam* (seasonal) cultivation on annual lease basis on the bank of the river Brahmaputra. These were Dobaduar or Borchapori Hathibandha village consisting of 20 households and Upper Teliagaon consisting of 26 households. These two villages were reported to have been established nine years prior to the date of notification. The two villages were soon ordered to be shifted. As compensation they were paid Rs 25 per household having land over 20 bighas and Rs 15 per households having land less than 20 bighas.

It was however not until January 3, 1908 that the final declaration of Kaziranga as reserve forest was issued (vide notification No. 37 F) covering an area of 56,544 acres. Soon however, an area of 1,441.60 acres of land had to be dereserved opposite to Kuthori and Baguri villages in order to provide access and allow Hathikhuli and Kuthori tea estates to continue despatch of tea by boat through the Mora Diffoloo river. On January 28, 1913 the government came up with another notification (No. 295 R) adding

another area of 13.506 acres to the Kaziranga Reserve Forest. This however, evoked a lot of objections from the European tea planters who felt that the area available for big game shooting would be greatly reduced. Major A Playfair, then then Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar district who was also officiating as Forest Settlement Officer and was tasked with facilitating the creation of a reserve forest, dismissed the planters' plea on the ground that the object of reserving more land was to preserve the rhinoceros and wild buffaloes in these parts.

Official records of that year claimed that the number of rhinos in Kaziranga Reserve Forest had already risen to some 20 pairs from just a dozen at the beginning of the 20th Century, thanks mainly to the conservation efforts that had begun in 1905.

Interestingly, all these efforts were not necessarily to put a full stop to killing of animals either by poachers or hunters. Instead, the government's sole intention till then was for 'preservation of game, more particularly the rhinoceros.' The stress was more on 'regulating the hunting in government reserved forests.' Therefore, the Conservator of Forests mooted an innovative idea of meeting the annual expenditure incurred in maintaining the proposed reserved forest. "Any public money spent on the protection of them (Kaziranga and Laokhowa etc) should be partly if not wholly

recovered in fees for permits to hunt from *shikaris* who will benefit by the preservation of the game," he wrote.

The various rates that Carr proposed to recover from *shikaris* makes fascinating reading. Carr wanted those willing to enter the reserved forest for a hunt to be classified in three categories and would be charged accordingly. Thus a non-resident of Assam would have had to pay Rs 50 for a license, while residents of Assam who did not belong to the districts under which the proposed Kaziranga reserved forest fell, would be charged Rs 30. Hunters from the same districts (i.e. Sibsagar and Nowgong) on the other hand



were luckier; they needed to pay just Rs 20.

Carr also specified that the licenses for hunting in Kaziranga reserved forest would be granted only between the months of July and December, but each hunter could get the permit to shoot for a period not exceeding a month. Some of the terms and conditions for issuing licenses reflects the thinking of those times when killing carnivorous animals like tigers and leopards was not specifically restricted, the hunters seeking the shooting permits had to take prior permission for 'the maximum number of certain animals other than carnivorous animals that may be shot.'

Thus anyone who wanted to kill a rhinoceros would have had to pay Rs 50 'for the first animal killed,' and Rs 100 'for a second or every subsequent animal killed under the same license,' while for buffalo, the rates were fixed at Rs 10 and Rs 20 respectively. However to prevent misuse of this provision it was proposed that 'the number of animals permitted to be killed ordinarily under one license and in any one shooting season will be regulated by the Divisional



Forest Officer of the district or in consultation with him if the license is issued by any other officer.'

The fastidiousness of British officers for rules and regulations was evident in another clause of the draft regulation prepared by the Conservator of Forests which specified 'close seasons' for different animals and birds when no hunting was to be allowed inside Kaziranga. The close seasons were listed as shown in the following table:

ANIMALS/BIRDS	CLOSE SEASONS
Rhinoceros and buffalo when accompanied by young	Whole year
Female bison	Whole year
All deer	1 st May to 31 st October
Hornless male deer or deer with horns in velvet and females of all deer	Whole year
Green pigeon (osmotreron, treron, sphenocerons, chalcophaps), Imperial pigeon (ducula, carpophaga) Doves (turtur, oenopopelia)	15 th March to 15 th June
Jungle fowl	1 st March to 30 th November
Pheasants, Partridge and Pea fowl	1 st April to 1 st September
Florikan	1 st June to 1 st November
Resident duck and Teal	1 st June to 1 st October

Over and above these restrictions, the proposed notification had strictly prohibited hunting, shooting, killing, injuring or capturing of wild elephants while killing of fish by

dynamiting or poisoning was 'absolutely prohibited.' Any violation of the above restrictions were liable to prosecution under the Forest Regulation, and anyone found guilty was to be punished with the penalties, viz., up to two years' imprisonment or Rs 500 as fine or both.

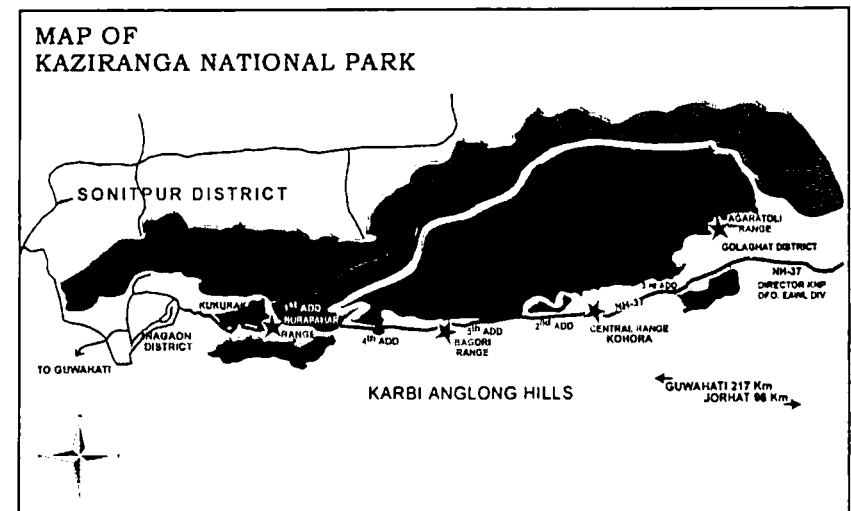
The proposed notification included three more important rules among many other minute details. For instance, permit holders were supposed to camp only on specified camping grounds. Similarly, the hunters were required to give 24 hours prior notice to the forest officials before entering the forest. And finally a forest guard would compulsorily accompany every permit holder who would pay for his services. The forest guard was tasked with keeping a strict watch on the hunter and report any violation of rules.

Even as the rules were being framed and new areas were being added from time to time, the government came out with a notification on November 10, 1916 which changed the nomenclature of Kaziranga from a reserve forest a 'Game Sanctuary.' With time, more areas were added to the originally demarcated boundary of Kaziranga. On July 26, 1917 for instance, an area of 37, 529 acres was added (vide notification No. 3560 R). This was also followed by an order to shift four temporary villages who were holding annual lease of land—Lotabari Bahoni (13 households),

Lotabaria Charighoria (16 households), Arimora (14 households) and Ahom Chapori (six households). Interestingly, though the villagers did not claim any compensation, the government thought it fit to pay them Rs 50 per household and Rs 20 per granary—a substantial amount in those days.

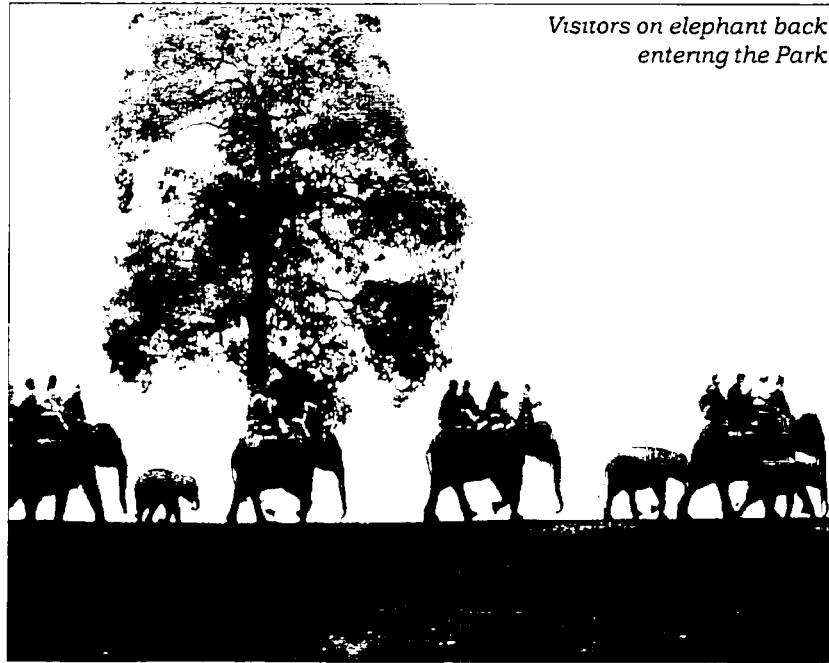
Today Arimora is a major watering hole for many animals deep inside the National Park. The Forest Department in fact has a rest house which also serves as an important observation post for the anti-poaching staff.

Though Kaziranga was declared a Game Sanctuary in November 1916, hunting continued, though in a regulated manner under the rules laid out by Carr. For nearly the



next two decades, Kaziranga was visited only by game hunters who came for a shikar after obtaining due permission from the authorities. In 1938, AJW Milroy, who was then the conservator of forests in Assam, threw the sanctuary open to tourists, thus opening a new chapter in Kaziranga's history. This step of opening the sanctuary for non-shikaris gave a much-needed boost to conservation efforts and awareness about wildlife among the common people.

Later PD Stracey, who went on to become chief conservator of forests, took off from where Milroy had left and speeded



Visitors on elephant back entering the Park

up the anti-poaching campaign to protect the rhinos after the World War II. In fact, it was Stracey who changed Kaziranga's status from a 'game sanctuary' to a 'wildlife sanctuary' in 1950 because he felt that the word 'game' connotated animals for hunting. One man who did much to popularise Kaziranga was the Golaghat-based Robin Banerjee. A physician by profession, he worked tirelessly for conservation and protection of the Park. However, it took another 24 years to upgrade Kaziranga to a National Park.

Till India attained Independence in 1947, there was only one National Park in the entire sub-continent. That honour belonged to Hailey National Park at foothills of Himalayas in the then United Province, later renamed as Uttar Pradesh.

The first two decades after Independence saw a few more wildlife sanctuaries in different states of the country being upgraded to National Parks. The authorities in Assam were also pursuing a similar dream for Kaziranga but they were hampered by the absence of any provision under the Assam Forest Regulation, 1891 for declaring any forest as a national park. Thus a separate act, known as the Assam National Park Act, was enacted in the state in 1968. The preliminary notification declaring the intention of the Government of Assam to constitute Kaziranga into a

National Park under this Act was published through a notification (No. FOR/WL/722/68/45) on September 25, 1969.

Most people across the state welcomed the move but those living on the fringe areas of the proposed Park, expressed their vehement opposition to it. While some objected to the inclusion of the Mora Diffoloo River within the proposed limit of the Park, the graziers thought they would be deprived from the privilege of grazing their buffaloes once Kaziranga became a National Park. Sanjay Debroy (who later went on to win the prestigious Norman Borlaug Award), the divisional forest officer in charge of Kaziranga when the preliminary notification for declaring Kaziranga as a National Park was issued, had a tough time convincing the people in the vicinity to give up their dependence on the rhino homeland.

Paramananda Lahon, who succeeded Debroy, remembers those difficult days: "Our biggest problem was to tell the people that they could no longer go into the forest for collecting firewood or catch fish since Kaziranga was set to become a National Park. Those days awareness about wildlife conservation was not as good as it is today. People simply could not understand that Kaziranga was to become a prohibited area aimed at protecting the wildlife in general and the rhino in particular. I and my staff had to go round

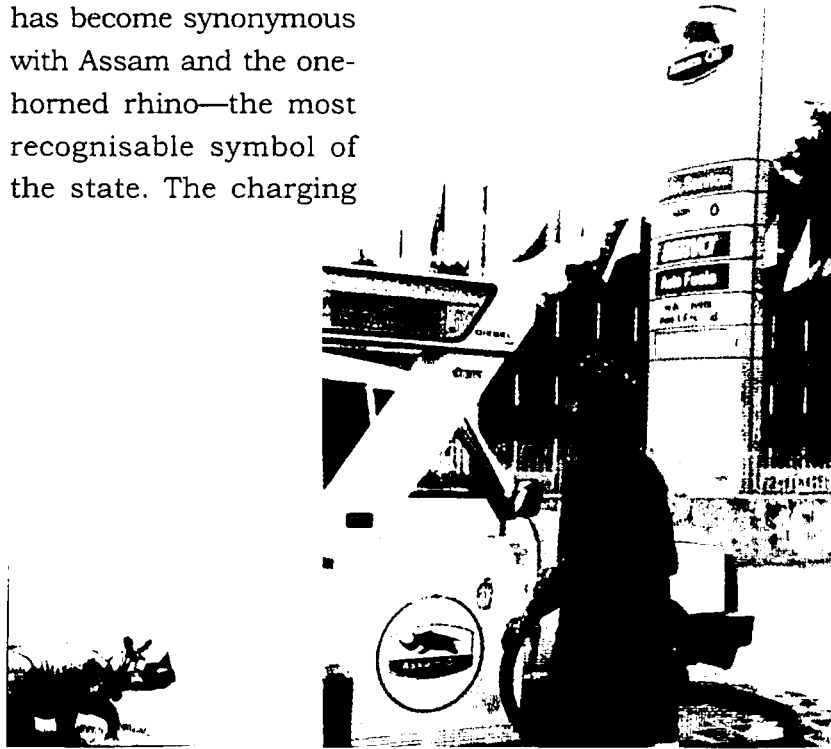
the villages very often and persuade the people to understand our compulsions. It took us more than four years to get across to them fully, but once they were convinced, I must say they fully cooperated with us."

Thus on February 11, 1974 the Government Assam issued the final notification (No. FOR/WL/722/68) declaring Kaziranga as a National Park with retrospective effect from January 1, 1974. This notification was published in the Assam Gazette on March 27, 1974. Lahon, who was then the Divisional Forest Officer of the Eastern Assam Wildlife



Division (which also covered the Kaziranga Wildlife Sanctuary) automatically became the administrative head of the newly-created National Park. It was however only a decade later that the post of Field Director—equivalent to the rank of Conservator of Forest—was created in Kaziranga. Coincidentally, Lahon, who by then had become a conservator, was appointed as the first Field Director of Kaziranga in July 1984.

Three decades after it became a National Park, Kaziranga has become synonymous with Assam and the one-horned rhino—the most recognisable symbol of the state. The charging



one-horned rhino has in fact become the official logo for many companies and corporations. For instance, it is seen not only on the buses of the Assam State Transport Corporation, but is also the official mascot of the Assam Oil Company (later renamed as Assam Oil Division, a fully-owned subsidiary of petroleum giant Indian Oil Corporation). Quite naturally, the rhino is the mascot of the Assam Tourism department too. It will also be seen as the official mascot for India's 33rd National Games to be held in late 2005 in Assam's capital Guwahati. More interestingly, it is even visible as the crest on a fighter squadron of the Indian Air Force, based at Tezpur, not very far from Kaziranga.



The rhino is used as a logo by many companies and for many purposes