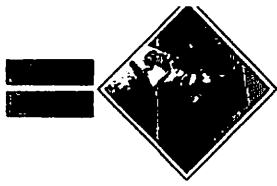




11th - 17th february 2005

Celebrating the century's
greatest conservation success story



When Monómoha Gorh Smiles

Anjali Tirkey

Much before the crimson rays of the setting sun filters through the silvery green canopy of the trees, wallowing in the muddy *beel* the old *Grandpa Rhino* sighs. The jungle and its denizens stand still for a while. They know that the good old *Grandpa Rhino* is lost in the past. Reminiscing. They throng to the *beel* as they know it is the usual story time. Grandpa Rhino unfolds the history slowly, punctuated with some longing and more sighs.

Rhino Reigned

Much before Man walked on this planet, the rhinoceroses ruled the Earth. Moving freely, care freely, for the world was theirs. And while their contemporaries, the dinosaurs etc. failed to adjust to the ever-changing Earth of about 50 million years ago, the rhinos evolved, remained persistent like true rulers and became an emblem for valour, strength and perseverance.

The Great Indian One-horned Rhinoceros once reigned over the entire marshlands of the Indian subcontinent, almost skirting the Himalayas extending over 2,500 km in the Terai arc of the Indus, the Ganga and the Brahmaputra Rivers.

His voice was coated with an obvious pride.

"Elephants, tigers never dared us. For the jungle respected us. Much later even the poets penned couplets on us: *Fearing nothing, caring for nothing; Wander alone, like the rhinoceros.*"

Lost was he in the memories of bygone days- the days of grandeur and more importantly, freedom.

The forest waited. Waited for him to shed the tear he was holding back.

Paradise Lost

But grazing, nearby, the green grass was the *Goonda Gainda*,



Photo courtesy : Arup Ballav Goswami

named so for his short-temper and cynical nature. Bitterness filled his heart. He had seen the days turn sour. He had a different tale to tell. Tales of Man's gruesome deeds which pushed the rhinos to the brink of extinction.

It did not take Man, the otherwise weakest of all creatures, to become the master of the Earth because of his superior mind. And when they multiplied, they unhesitatingly encroached into the homes of the dwellers of the forests. With an inflated "I" and "all for me" attitude they destroyed the jungles for their many needs (or was it greed??). That, accompanied with a reckless desire for "game" and the deep rooted belief however mistaken about the magical powers of rhino's parts especially the horn, resulted in the extermination of the rhinos.

"Our might and courage failed to stand in front of the cunningness and sophisticated equipments of Man." He snorted and kicked the mud in disgust. Disgust for the species that he thought was the cause of all the chaos.

Forced to live in an ever-dwindling habitat, killed for a mere "thrill or an adrenaline-rush" or for its supposedly aphrodisiacal power, their numbers shrank perilously to just a few.

"It was not Nature, but Man who wanted us to become another extinct species, to become a part of only books, museums and History...." His voice trembled with pain and contempt. The sky wept silently. The raindrops shook and glistened on the greens.

The Unicornis Curse

The great Indian one-horned rhinoceros carries its curse on its nose. Its biggest tragedy is to have been endowed with numerous magical and medicinal properties in the folklore of Asian countries and medieval Europe. This probably transformed the one-horned rhino into the mythical unicorn. Over the centuries, this peculiar creature became a universal apothecary: Drinking its urine, it was claimed, would cure skin diseases, a plaster of rhino dung could ease swellings, and the umbilical stump boiled in soup was good for rheumatism. But the horn, in reality only a mass of hair

tissue, was and continues to be the prized item, especially in traditional Chinese medicine, where it is prescribed for everything from cancer to headaches and fever to aphrodisiac.

Paradise Regained

Suddenly, the tall elephant grasses moved. *Monómoha Gorh* hopped in with a rainbow on its nose. The wind brimmed with a zest unseen. "Let bygones be bygones" was his mantra. "And if you still want the story to continue, hear mine for in my story hope floats," said he.

On the winter afternoon, of 4th November, 1902, when perhaps only a dozen rhinos basked in the sun, not knowing for how long they could afford to do that, a letter from J.C.Arbutnot Esq. C.I.E, ICS Offg. Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts reached to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam. The letter bore the message of a new dawn for the wildlife, in particular, the rhinos. The humans had realized the need to conserve the Majestic Maharaja from the pre- historic era.

Of course, things did not change with just one letter, in one day and without hiccups. (In fact, often files and more files need to be moved in *babudom* and they often take much longer to move than Nature to change from one season to another or a snail to cross Alexander's Kingdom.)

Wild fauna and its conservation had never been a priority but the ball did start rolling, letters being exchanged and the dark clouds of despair thinning.

It was in January, 1905, the draft notification regarding the Proposed Kaziranga Game Reserve was submitted and finally later in the same year, it was proposed to constitute as reserve forest by the Chief Commissioner of Assam.



Photo courtesy : Arup Ballav Goswami

It is even said that Lady Curzon who had paid a visit in 1905 and was so spellbound by Kaziranga and its pride – the rhino- that she had persuaded Lord Curzon to spur the Government's role in the conservation of the animal.

This was the beginning of a new leaf in the pages of Kaziranga's applause-worthy Conservation History.

Finally in 1908, Kaziranga was declared a Reserve Forest and in 1916 it was notified as Game Sanctuary. But since the word "Game" did not sound "correct", in 1950, Kaziranga was termed Wildlife Sanctuary.

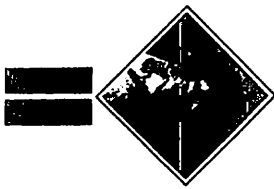
But the road was uphill. While shooting for "sports" stopped, poaching for the horn continued in a large scale. In fact in the 30's Kaziranga was a forbidden place. The old records put it as a closed book. A closed door for visitors. And death loomed for the rhinos near every *beels* and *dandies*. It was the Chief Conservator A.J.W. Milroy who thought different. His decision to open up the sanctuary for visitors in 1938 and his clean up drive against the poachers and poaching paid dividends. Officers like Mahi Miri and others joined the drive showing dedication nonpareil for the cause of wildlife. Mahi Miri and a few, with a spirit painted with the colours of Nature, paid the price of dreaming a green world with their very lives.

In 1968, Assam National Park Act came into being and in 1974 Kaziranga was catapulted to the status of National Park. In 1975 it became the first protected area to be equipped with wireless.

And the Government, the foresters, the wildlife enthusiasts and the nature loving people of Assam had a reason to celebrate when in 1985 Kaziranga was declared one of the 5 Natural World Heritage sites in India by UNESCO under UN Convention for Protection of World's Cultural and Natural heritage under the criteria N (II) and N (IV) of Article2.

And that was not the end of the encouraging tale.

- The 1998 census showed that Kaziranga with its 1552 Great Indian One-horned Rhinoceros was the place with their world's largest population. Now it is estimated to be about 1700.
- It also has the highest ecological density of Royal Bengal tigers (86 in nos. as per 2000 census) in the region.



- 1431 numbers of Asiatic Wild Buffaloes made it the park with their largest population in the world in 2001.
- The world's largest population of Eastern Swamp Deer dwells in Kaziranga (468 as per the 2000 census).
- The 2002 census showed a significant population of 1048 Asiatic Elephants.

The awesome "BIG FIVE" of Kaziranga. The largest assemblages of flora and fauna! A result of adequate protection and in-situ conservation efforts that dates back to a century.

Monomóha Gorh stopped for a breath. Nature smiled. Somewhere someone gave a silent clap.

Amazing Ambience

North East India had always been Nature's blue-eyed baby, for Nature had been more than generous in bestowing its beauty to it. Considered a bowl of plant diversity, the place is identified as Bio-diversity Hotspot due to its unique ecological setting; the meeting point of temperate Himalayan flora, palaeo-artic flora of Tibetan highland and wet evergreen flora of Southeast Asia and Yunnan.

And Kaziranga, the heart of the North East, with its rare flora and fauna, high endemism and rare Taxa is especially known as a Living Hotspot. The fluctuations in the river Brahmaputra make it a spectacularly alive, ongoing ecological and biological process in the evolution of the riverine floodplain eco-systems in the world. One of the largest protected area under Burma Monsoon Biogeographical Province; it stands apart for its uniqueness and diversity. The canvass stretches from the microscopic aquatic herbs to lofty deciduous trees and the fauna life from the soil invertebrates to the Mega Fives.

And what more can be said about its being the bird watcher's delight?

Located at the junction of the Australasia and Indo-Asian flyway, Kaziranga becomes an abode for the many species of migrating, and seasonal breeding and nesting avifauna. The 480 species of birds recorded in its vicinity includes around 25 globally threatened and 21 near threatened species of birds.

The place showcases a biological richness which has considerable Conservation, Research, Education and Recreation values.

And Kaziranga100 is the time to celebrate all this. A time to salute the many, who made sacrifices (and are still doing) for fulfilling Nature's dream.

The Green Warriors

Kaziranga saw many dedicated wild lifers who had a burning passion for its denizens, like those of

- **J. C. Arbuthnott** : the pioneer who heard the cry of the rhinos.
- **B. Fuller** : *Chief Commissioner of Assam* who suggested possibility of

establishing an asylum for the rhinos.

- **Major Gurdon** : who surveyed the area for the Proposed Reserve.
- **Lady Curzon** whose legendary love for the wildlife spurred the government to hear the cries of the wild especially that of the rhinos of Kaziranga.
- **Major A. Playfair** : *Forest Settlement Officer & Deputy Commissioner, Sibsagar District*, who overruled strong objections from local people and European community of tea planters for the extension of Kaziranga in the year 1913.
- **H Carter (1908)** : *Conservator of Forests, Eastern Circle*. He immediately banned hunting, shooting, trapping and fishing by an executive order.
- **W F L Totton (1916)** : *Conservator of Forests, Eastern Circle*, declared Reserve Forest as Game Sanctuary with the approval of the Chief Commissioner.
- **P D Stracey (1950)** : Ordered the name Wildlife Sanctuary in place of Game Sanctuary.
- **P Barua (1968)** : *Chief Conservator of Forests, Assam*. The proposal to declare Kaziranga Wildlife Sanctuary as National Park was taken up by him.



- **A. J. W. Milroy** : the man who started the drive against the poachers and opened the Park for visitors in 1938.
- **Mahi Chandra Miri** : the first Indian officer appointed in Kaziranga. Death was the price he paid in saving the wild fauna.
- **E. P. Gee** : a naturalist whose love for Kaziranga put the place in the world map.
- **J Juan Spillet** : the man to conduct the first animal census.
- **Padamshri Dr. Robin Banerjee** whose movie "Kaziranga" telecasted from Berlin TV in 1961, gave Kaziranga an international fame.
- The many, often bare-footed, unsung heroes – the frontline staffs of KNP who work ceaselessly to preserve the legacy that is Kaziranga.
- The staff elephants.

The Wonder that is Kaziranga

Kaziranga with the initial area of 430sq km in the Brahmaputra Valley spreading over the districts of Golaghat and Nagaon and the foothills of Karbi Anglong Hills, has over the years acquired new additions (6 in nos.) and now covers an area of 860 sq km. Imbued with myriad tints of green, it is a place redolent with the spirit of adventure and the fragrance of freedom. Marshes, *beels*, the woodlands, sprawling grasslands, cane groves, orchids, rugged reeds and the rivers and streams that crisscross the Park make it perfect piece of paradise for its inhabitants.

Monómoha Gorh thought it was time to call it a day. "Some discoveries must be made oneself or told with much breaks," he said. And when he again disappeared in the grasslands, the rainbow still following him, the jungle resounded with the joyful cries of the wild. They knew that now they can sleep in peace for the men in khakis were keeping the vigil.

The Laurels

The efforts made by the management in Kaziranga, were not unnoticed by the world. Gigantic concerns like floods, poaching, erosion, forest fire, weeds and siltation of water bodies, habitat improvement have always been dealt efficiently.

Kaziranga has many laurels up its sleeve like:

- The Best Managed National Park in anti-poaching strategies. (1985)
- Millennium Award for Best Managed Park in Tiger Conservation areas. (1999)
- Fred Packard Valour Award of the IUCN's World Commission to D.D. Boro (Range Officer, KNP) for exemplary valour shown by him to protect wildlife and forest wealth. (1977)
- Special Award for Teamwork in handling exigencies. (1998)
- Green Guard Award (Jungles)

Pats on the Back

Kaziranga has attracted tourists from far and near.

Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru paid a visit along with Indira Gandhi and Firoze Gandhi on October 1956.

Lal Bahadur Shastri, (then Minister for Transport and Railways, India) wrote "It was a delightful experience to wade through the marshy jungles, moving quietly and slowly to have a peep at the rhinos resting in isolated corners... I hope Kaziranga will soon develop into an important tourist centre..."

On 20th April 1948, Sir Akbar Hydari, Governor of Assam mentions "... 11 rhinos were seen by my party and we also saw two (rhinos) *Kaziram* and *Kamalarani*, who were recently caught and were due to go to

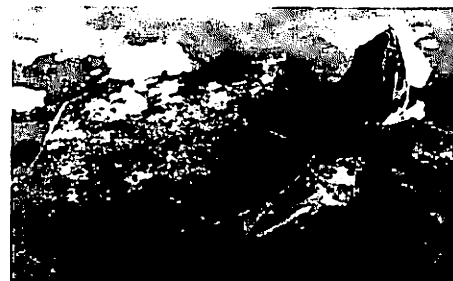


Photo courtesy : Prasanta Kr. Bordoloi

Chicago Zoo... We spent many hours on elephant going to reserve and saw wild buffalo, swamp deer and the pig... I hope soon it may be possible for large number of people to see this interesting game sanctuary which is one of the last known homes in the world of the one-horned rhino."

Famous ornithologist Dr. Salim Ali from the Bombay Natural History Society, Anthropologist Dr. Verrier Elwin, Padamshri Dr. Robin Banerjee found the sojourn in Kaziranga "an enchanting experience".

Ralph Graham of Chicago Zoological Society thought it was "worth the trip from America" in 1948.

E.P. Gee in 1939 says "charged by the first rhino and cine photographed by the second" when attempting to shoot them.

(I would say to the over enthusiastic tourists follow the rules of the Park and you will be charged only by the Forest Department.)

But the spirit of Kaziranga100 is about much more. It is also about the people of Assam. The lovers of green, the crusaders in their own right who joined hands in translating dreams into realities.



Photo courtesy : Arup Ballav Goswami

Jagjivan Ram (Minister for Agriculture, India) in 1953 said " *thrilling experience... arrangements for the protection of animals as well as comfort for visitors should be an example for other states....*"

Dr. Manmohan Singh (Prime Minister of India) recorded in 1982 as Member Secretary Planning Commission, Govt. of India "A lovely, exciting place where man and nature learn to live in proper balance."

Rajiv Gandhi during his Prime Ministerial tenure in 1988 was moved by the plight of animals during the floods (the year saw the worst floods in Kaziranga) and came with Sonia Gandhi.

U.S. Ambassadors Mr. Blackwill and Mr. Mulford had an enjoyable trip in 2002 and 2004 respectively.

Hands that hold the Olive Branch

But the spirit of Kaziranga100 is about much more. It is also about the people of Assam. The lovers of green, the crusaders in their own right who joined hands in translating dreams into realities.

Assam. An emerald vale; where the people of various culture and religion melted, predominantly those of Caucasian origin and the Mongoloids. The different ethnic groups brewed up a cultural

identity and ethos that is un-encountered anywhere else in the country. This is the time to lose oneself in their world. A world that's an unbeatable blend of the Ahoms, the Misings, the Karbis, the Dimasas, the Bodos, the Adivasis in the tea gardens to name a few. A time to enjoy their myths and folklores, their songs and dances, their culture and cuisine, their handlooms and craft and their relaxed lifestyle and laidback ambience. A time to lift the veil from the strangers of the mist. A time to revive the bonding between Man and Nature and in today's fragmented society, between men themselves.

Kaziranga that has rightly been termed as the flag bearer amongst all wildlife conservation efforts across the globe beckons you into its hundredth year. It's time to join its tradition and celebrate the bliss of living and let living.

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