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IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

By Subodh Rana Tuesday, February 08, 2011

The National Geographic Magazine has always been my favorite print medium for gaining insight into vanishing cultures, insular societies and natural phenomena that blow your mind. A combination of precise writing and award-winning photography brought these wonderful worlds to our living room before cable TV took over. I was curious when we got a call from Lisa Choegyol informing us that a correspondent from Natgeo wanted to interview my father. The year was 1982 and I had returned to Nepal from Europe with my recently-married wife just a year earlier. What was the subject of the interview I enquired? True to Natgeo form they wanted to interview father on one of the rarely performed sacred Hindu religious rituals.

The One-horned Indian Rhinoceros is one of the few mammals surviving today that has the look of a prehistoric creature a million years old. Chitwan or *Chitta-bana*, the heart of the jungle, located in the Nepal Terai is the natural habitat of these magnificent beasts. The depleting number and valuable "horns" of the rhino worked in its favor as they ensured that the rulers of Nepal would not allow these beasts to be hunted and killed indiscriminately. Poaching was punishable by a heavy penalty. The rhino was a game animal even more prized than the Royal Bengal Tiger and thus reserved only for the rulers of Nepal and their VVIP royal guests.

Albert Edward the Prince of Wales, later to ascend the British throne as King Edward VII, was here to hunt the rhino in 1876 A.D. as guest of Maharajah Jung Bahadur Rana and so was King Emperor George VI here in 1911 A.D. as guest of Maharajah Chandra Shumsher Rana. The latter shot 8 rhinos in 10 days.



H.R.H. THE PRINCE OF WALES IN INDIA—SIR JUNG BAHADUR DIRECTING A PROCESSION OF 700 ELEPHANTS ACROSS THE SARDA, NEPAUL

We Hindus perform the death ritual known as *Shraddha*, the living paying obeisance to their dear departed father, mother and grandparents by offering the *pinda*, balls of rice as token of our eternal gratitude. The *Shraddha* is performed annually in the latter half of the month of September when the harvesting is done and before we celebrate the plentitude during Dashera, we offer food to the dead spirits. In the epic Mahabharata the King Yudhistir asks the wise Pitamah Bhisma what would be the most fitting offerings to the spirits of the dead ancestors during *Shraddha*. The wise one enumerates a whole range of offerings including cereals and meats and for the specific period these would satisfy the dead. In the age before our current *Kali Yuga* even flesh was offered as *pinda*, including that of the holy cow! At last Bhisma tells Yudhistir definitively that the flesh of the rhinoceros offered during *Shraddha* would be the most meritorious and would satisfy the spirits for eternity. Hindu kings and aristocracy followed this cue and probably took this tradition a step further by giving *tarpan* or offerings from inside the carcass of the dead rhino.

The year was 1953 A.D. and my father General Kiran Shumsher had made elaborate preparations for King Tribhuvan's hunt in the Nepal Terai. As Commander-in-Chief of the Nepalese army the responsibility fell on his shoulders to look after all logistics. King Tribhuvan had taken over the throne of Nepal in 1951 A.D. following a short exile, the Rana oligarchy had been overthrown and the king had

come of his own. This was the first royal hunt the king would enjoy as sovereign and not under the tutelage of the ruling Ranas. I remember my father recalling what happened on the eve of the departure of the King. The previous night he got a call from King Tribhuvan and he was informed that the king was unable to proceed to the hunt due to some political exigency and he generously commanded father to proceed by himself and make use of the royal camp lest all the elaborate preparations made be in vain.



Gen. Kiran with rhino hide object d'art

It was during this hunt that my father bagged a rhinoceros. It was an ambition of his to perform *tarpan* too just as his father Maharajah Juddha Shumsher had performed this ritual. The rhino was cleaned of its entrails and preparations for the puja made. My father, clad in the pure white *dhoti* loin cloth and the *janai* sacred thread around his body, entered the belly of the beast and amidst Vedic chanting by the assembled Brahmin priests offered blood *tarpan* to his father, mother and our ancestors. This was the story covered by National Geographic Magazine all those many years ago. Who might have performed such a ritual in Nepal after my father? Who else other than H.M. King Birendra would be able to perform such an impossible ritual in the modern era? After having shot a rhino the previous day, on 9 January 1981 the king entered the carcass of a disemboweled rhino on the banks of the River Rapti and offered the blood *tarpan* to his father King Mahendra and to his ancestors. This was recorded to be the last

time such a sacred ritual was performed. Indeed, the vanishing world of esoteric cults such as this one has been documented by National Geographic Magazine for posterity and we are much the wiser for it!



General Kiran with rhino