



The greater one-horned rhinoceros, or Indian Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*), represents pride and resilience for the Assamese. There is a profound connection between the Assamese people and the majestic pachyderm, especially given Assam's remarkable success in saving the species from extinction over the past century. Throughout history, mankind has been fascinated by the rhinoceros' unusual body structure, formidable horn, and solitary appearance with odd toes.

The Indus Valley Civilization records rhinoceros sightings dating back to roughly 5,000 years ago during the Mohenjodaro era. Although written accounts of rhinoceros emerged approximately 500 years ago, archaeological evidence indicates its significance to earlier civilisations across the subcontinent. The human fascination with the rhino can be seen in the travelogues of past explorers and travellers such as Al-Biruni (1030), Ibn Battuta (1334), and Marco Polo (16th century), who documented human fascination with this majestic animal. A number of emperors, including Timur and Babur, indulged in rhino hunting until the early 20th century. The rhino population could even be found as far west as Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat which points to its far and wide distribution in the past.

It has been portrayed in both historical and cultural narratives that the rhinoceros has left its mark on literature. In his 1779 book *Iconology*, Scottish architect George Richardson linked the rhinoceros to one of the most profound symbols of all – the Ganga. Norfolk's 1996 novel *The Pope's Rhinoceros* revisits the story of Dürer's rhinoceros in 1515, while Clara's *Wonderful Journey* (1742-1756) tells the story of an Assamese rhinoceros, Clara, and her journey across Europe with

Sighting the rhino

DR DEBA KUMAR DUTTA writes on the legacy and future of rhino conservation in Assam on the occasion of World Rhino Day.

her Dutch owner, Douwe Mout van der Meer.

The account of a hunting party attended by Jean-Baptiste Chevalier at the court of Swargodeo Rajeswar Singha (1751-1769), ruler of the Ahom Kingdom, demonstrates the historical ties between Assam and the rhino. Numerous British officers, surveyors, and hunters documented the presence of the Greater One-Horned Rhinoceros in the 19th century in Assam and neighbouring states. As mentioned in *Sketch of Assam* (1847) and *Travels and Provinces of Assam* (1855), Major John Butler of the Bengal Native Infantry reported sightings of rhinoceros in Guwahati. *The Topography of Assam* (1837) by John M'Cosh discusses rhino captures for export to Europe. Moreover, the Cooch Behar Maharaja's *Thirty-seven Years of Big Game Shooting in Cooch Behar, the Duars, and Assam* (1908) highlights the history of hunting in Western Assam.

While Assam has a long history of rhino hunting, it has evolved into a global leader in rhino conservation in the 21st century. The state is now home to over 72 per cent of the world's wild rhino population, with key strongholds such as the Kaziranga National Park, Orang National Park, Manas

National Park, and Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary at the forefront. Despite this success, rhinos still face significant challenges, including poaching, habitat loss, and the risk of inbreeding due to limited connectivity among Assam's rhino habitats. In this context, the Brahmaputra could serve as a crucial "biological corridor," linking all rhino-bearing areas in Assam.

Conservation efforts centered on rhinos have been highly effective, particularly under the Indian Rhino Vision (IRV) 2020 initiative, which guided a new phase of conservation from 2005 to 2020. The IRV 2020 programme developed a strong emotional connection with the people of Assam, resulting in a greater commitment to rhino conservation. Over the past decade, national and international experts, state forest officials, local community organisations, different institutions and volunteers have worked tirelessly to re-establish the rhino population in Manas National Park following years of poaching. The programme not only revitalised Manas but also improved confidence, skills, and scientific understanding on the rhino conservation front in Assam. The programme also narrows down community participation in rhino conservation efforts across all

rhino bearing areas within the state. Today, two UNESCO World Heritage Sites (natural) in Assam – Kaziranga and Manas – proudly protect the rhinoceros, a species that was once on the verge of extinction.

Along with translocation efforts, rescue and rehabilitation initiatives have played an important role in the establishment of new rhino populations in Manas. It should be noted that since the completion of IRV 2020, the follow-up program, IRV 2.0, has yet to gain momentum in Assam.

There is a deep ingrained passion for rhino in the culture of the state, which makes it a leader in the area of rhino conservation. Rhino conservation stands as a symbol of the success of these efforts, and this conservation mindset has the potential to serve as a model for tackling other pressing environmental challenges that Assam and the rest of the Northeastern region are facing as well. We must come together, develop an understanding of the science, and build strong political commitment if we are to accomplish broader conservation goals. The state of Assam has remained at the forefront of rhino conservation during the last century as Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, led efforts to create game reserves to protect India's wildlife, encouraged by his American-born wife, Lady Mary Curzon. The State will be able to maintain its position as a global leader in the wildlife sector if it continues to implement fervently a rhino-centric approach. Let us celebrate the achievements of Assam post World Rhino Day and renew our commitment to make sure that this majestic species thrives for generations to come by ensuring its survival.

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