



The last of the Rhinos

Excerpts from the book -

*The twilight of India's
wildlife*

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Photo courtesy : Ritu Raj Konwar



Photo courtesy : Arup Ballav Goswami

It was around the year 1910 that concern seems to have been first expressed about the future of the giant rhinoceros of Asia, the great one horned rhino (*Rhinoceros unicornis*). The then estimate of just over a thousand animals was sufficient cause for alarm. The first steps to legislate for its protection in India were initiated. Rhino were officially closed to sportsmen in Bengal and Assam. Many years later, in 1932, the Bengal Rhinoceros Act was passed, and in 1954, the Assam Rhinoceros Bill became law. The bills prohibited the killing, injuring or capture of any rhinoceros, and penalized contravention by fine or imprisonment.

Yet, this largest of the Asiatic rhinoceros had a former range extending from the north-western passes of India eastward towards Burma, precisely how far east is not known. Historical and hunting references leave no room for doubt that it must have lived in large numbers once.

It was about the time of Babar's hunt, in 1515, that the first Indian rhino is known to have been sent to Europe. It was a present from the King of Cambay to King Emmanuel of Portugal, and was shipped from Goa to Lisbon. A fight was arranged in Lisbon between this rhino and an elephant, and the elephant,

upon seeing the rhino, is said to have burst the arena and fled! King Emmanuel, who must have been very impressed then decided to present the rhino to Pope Leo X. It was shipped again, but the ship was caught in a storm in the Gulf of Genoa and sank with all hands and the rhino. This was the animal immortalized by Albrecht Dürer in an engraving; Dürer never saw the rhino but did his work from a sketch by Portuguese artist.

The first Indian rhino to enter England in 1684 was paraded round the country for the next two years. But African rhinos had often been brought to Rome in classical times, probably the white or square lipped rhinoceros, a more tractable animal than the black rhino.

In northern Bengal, the rhino was once sufficiently numerous to be saddled with a major responsibility for the destruction of rice and corn fields – with little justification, however, as the great Indian rhino is not a crop-destroyer, although occasionally it may enter cultivated fields for titbits. The government even offered reward of Rs.20/- per head for its destruction.



Photo courtesy : Arup Ballav Goswami

The position in India after the First World War was that sportsmen could not legitimately hunt the rhino. But, in Nepal- the second survival home of this rhino- it was a different story. High caste Hindus and Gurkhas considered the flesh and blood highly acceptable to the gods. Those who could, hunted the animals and offered libation of its blood after entering the disemboweled body. Special shoots arranged for distinguished visitors took heavy toll.

Even so, the rhino was still common thirty years ago in many parts of Nepal and in the Sikkim *Tera*i. But with such organized slaughter, numbers began to deplete. A slow breeder, the ancient animal could never catch up with the losses. In the late 1940s, the rhino was not to be seen in Nepal except in the Chitawan jungles, east of the Gandak river. External pressure began to be brought on the Nepal Government to protect the rhino.

As the numbers decreased, the values of the rhino's horn, most coveted of all its anatomy, increased. The meat and hide could be sold, but it was false horn, which in an adult animal weighs from two to five pounds, that was of prime interest to poachers. It was false horn, because it is nothing but hair matted together so solidly as to appear and feel horn-like. The first poachers came with muzzle-loaders heavy enough to dispose of the rhino, or caught it in pits. The horn has been highly prized in the East



Photo courtesy : Arup Ballav Goswami

from early times. It was endowed with a host of magical properties. In powered form it is still today considered in east and south-east Asian pharmaceutical trades a most potent aphrodisiac. Old accounts describe how the horns were sold in the Calcutta market – the most important rhino horn market in Asia – for 'half their weight in gold' and how eventually most of them found their way to China. It is known that in the first quarter of this century, single horns were sold for prices higher than £150. Lee Merriam Talbot reported in 1955, during an investigation of the status of the three Asian rhinoceros, that he saw individual merchants in south-east Asia offer prices as high as \$ 2,500 for one horn. In Sumatra, one Chinese merchant was offering a new American automobile in trade for a whole rhinoceros.

The horn had also other uses. A small fragment enclosed in a charm and worn round the neck or wrist made the wearer invulnerable to enemies. Extraordinary properties were also credited, to a lesser extent, to other parts of the body. Chewing the dry meat gave immunity against dysentery. Drinking the urine was a certain cure for all skin diseases. A sliver of bone inserted in an incision made on the arm injected the rhino's enormous strength into the man. Local hill tribes such as the Lhotas still bury a piece of rhino bone in their fields for a good harvest. Plaster made of the dung cured all kinds of swellings. Soup from boiling the umbilical stump was a certain cure for rheumatic and arthritic complaints. The Rengmas, another tribe, believe shields made from rhino hide impregnable in battle. This tribe has the further curious belief that the rhino sleeps on very steep ground, hooking its horn round a tree to save itself from slipping. It is easy to see that the poor beast, with such superlative qualities in its fleshy make-up, simply invited trouble.

Lest it be thought that rhinoceros superstitions are all of Eastern origin, many of these beliefs were once widely held in Europe. Rhinoceros-horn cups, for instance, were used by kings and popes to show up poison in their drinks by making the drink forth, or even cracking the cup. Rhino horn was also prized as an internal medicine, particularly for complaints of the stomach, well beyond the Middle Ages. Therefore, with the price they have carried on

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their heads, and indeed other parts of their anatomy, the wonder is not that rhinos are rare but that they exist at all.

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The sanctuary can be entered at more than one place, but is most easily accessible at Kohora by a jeep track which runs through open ground and paddy fields, which acts as a buffer zone between the sanctuary and the grazing lands of domestic livestock. Riding on an elephant in the thick grass, the grass looms over on all sides, and its sharp edges can cut into the flesh like a knife. On my first visit to Kaziranga in 1958, I saw my first rhino, a big bull, almost immediately on entering the sanctuary and while still on foot, making the transfer from jeep to elephant. I quickly scrambled on to my mount, a young female, and attempted to get near the rhino which was in a small, muddy pool. Due to some bad manoeuvring by the *mahout* and the greed of my mount, who on that trip never lost an opportunity of stopping and stuffing herself noisily with masses of green food, we were too slow, and the rhino beat a squelchy retreat from the mud-pool. He was an old beast, and I could see his flanks and rear were studded with masses of tubercles, which are characteristic of adult animals and become more and more prominent with advancing age.

A mother rhino and her calf on the far side of a *bheel*, as a small lake-swamp is called in these parts, made an interesting group. Rhino calves keep with their mothers for three years or more. The cow does not breed during this period, and a female therefore, gives birth to a calf only every four or five years – a slow breeding

Photo courtesy : John Everingham



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rate. Cow rhinos with young calves are known to have unpredictable tempers, and remembering the story that had been told to me the previous evening of the American visitor to the sanctuary whose elephant had been determinedly pursued by a mother rhino till she had inflicted a severe cut in the elephant's side, I did not consider it prudent to press too close an acquaintance with this mother. From where I was, she appeared to be almost white, in contrast to the big fellow I had seen before who was the usual ashy-grey, but this was due to the tricks of the early morning light and the ground mist which still hung about. The great one horned rhino inflicts injuries with its long lower teeth and not with its horn, as is generally believed. This is done by a quick side movement, and a terrible wound can result. I have seen the technique of it during later visits to Kaziranga, in not-too-serious tussles between bulls.

Often on the backs of rhinos were cattle egrets, pied mynas, or both, valets of the animal kingdom. Appropriately, it was Herodotus, the father of zoology, who first wrote of this association of a small creature with a big one. In his account of Egypt he wrote:

The crocodile is a foe to all birds and beasts, but the courser, which does it a service. For, living in the water, it gets its mouth full of leeches, and when it comes out and opens its mouth to the westerly breeze, the courser goes in and gobbles up the leeches, which good office so pleases the saurian that it does the courser no harm.

One local notable put the annual loss of rhino to poachers at thirty animals. In the 1964-65 scare, the carcasses were all found in the northern part of the sanctuary, and in one period of intensive search, thirty carcasses and over fifty poachers' pits were said to have been discovered. In all, there were hundred pits. Visitors to the sanctuary are shown around the southern fringe only, and the interior or the northern part which is waterlogged is seldom visited even by range staff owing to difficulties of terrain. Poachers accordingly cross the Brahmaputra from the north and gain ingress into the sanctuary. As an aftermath of the poaching, even as late

as the time of our visit, May 1965, the bazaars on the borders of the sanctuary were rife with rumors of the money involved, said to be in the region of Rs.4 lakhs. After the discovery of the carcasses and pits, the ensuring publicity was perhaps what brought the depredations to a temporary halt – temporary because the activities will no doubt be resumed should a favorable opportunity present itself. This nefarious work will cease only when the demand for rhino horn disappears, and as this is not likely to happen for a long time yet, the rhino is dependent entirely on the effectiveness of the protection given to it in the meantime

Kaziranga, like the Hluhluwe Reserve in the Union of South Africa, had its rhino personalities. The most famous of them was 'Burra Goonda' (corruption of Burra Gaenda or Big Rhino) who died in 1953. No one knew how old he was, but for the last fifteen years of his life he hardly left the locality he favoured on the southern fringe of the sanctuary, and visitors were assured of a close view of him either placidly wallowing in a mud pool or grazing peacefully among domestic animals on the verge of the sanctuary. He had many scars of battle with other rhinos, but at this period had become so gentle that with care he could be approached closely on foot. He was Kaziranga's most photographed rhino. The *mahouts* still tell a story, apocryphal no doubt, of how once a brave army officer actually hand-fed him with grass and then slapped him on his rump as much as to say, 'Well done, old boy.' The riding elephants of the time knew him and he knew them.

After his death, his place was taken by another old bull, 'Kankatta', or 'Torn-ear'. From being an aggressive animal, he settled down to the vacated number one position and lived for four years.

The estimated world population of the great one horned rhino is now thought to be about 745, connecting the figures of Gee (1963), Willian (1965 for Nepal), and J.J. Spillet (1967). Of this number, Assam has 525, Bengal 55, and Nepal 165. Again, of Assam's number, Kaziranga alone is thought to have 400. The other Assam's sanctuaries with rhino are Manas, Sonairupa, Laokhowa, Orang and one or two more very small reserves. A very few rhinos also live outside these sanctuaries, but their continued survival is uncertain with the poachers continually after them.

Kaziranga is, therefore, the rhino's most important survival home by far. It is also the best looked after of the Assam sanctuaries. Even more needs too be done to ensure its permanence. Poachers apart, the pressure of human population on its borders is a threat which could lead to excision of small parts from it from time to time, if not guarded against. Demands have many times been made for more grazing area for the proliferating domestic livestock, and this problem, I was told, had frequently figured in the manifestos issued by the local political parties during elections. Danger also exists from the proximity of cattle, in that any disease carried into the sanctuary by them will have serious consequences. Surveillance itself, within the sanctuary, has also to be improved by provision of facilities for the ranger staff to patrol the area which is both large and difficult – such as wheeled transport, and boats for use in the northern riverside parts. The annual flooding is also a grave problem, as it leads to loss of wild life during its migration to higher ground. But it may be a mixed blessing, for the floods may be of benefit in maintaining the sort of habitat favoured by both rhino and buffalo, which latter is the sanctuary's second most sought-after wild animal.

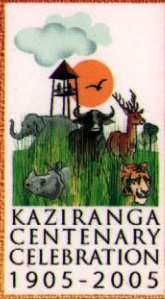


Photo courtesy : Ritu Raj Konwar

The great Indian rhino is of extraordinary interest to natural history. It is incapable of adapting itself to new circumstances or environment. In the final event, whether it will survive all the assaults on its continued existence will depend on the effective adoption of a policy which will safeguard it from every angle. There is no room for complacency with a world population of only 745 – and remembering that the other two Asiatic rhinoceros, the lesser one horned or Javan and the two horned or Sumatran, also lived in India but so no longer. The first of these disappeared from Indian limits probably around the turn of the century, but the latter is believed to have survived as late as the mid-1930s in the Mizo Hills.

The great rhino is a truly harmless animal, and does no damage whatever to human interests in the places where it still lives. It is often misrepresented as being aggressive or attacking on sight. Its blind, withering charge is delivered only when it believes it is in danger or when it is surprised in its haunts. Of course, it is then very dangerous. Otherwise it is neither truculent nor a crop-raider. It is one of India's most spectacular animals, a left-over from bygone ages, and a source of mystery and wonder to all who see it in its natural home.

Balakrishna Seshadri, an engineer with brilliant academic achievements has written prolifically on the subject of conservation. A member of Fauna Preservation Society, the Zoological Society of London, Bombay Natural History Society and Wild Life Preservation Society of India, Seshadri has studied and photographed animals in many countries. The above excerpts is from the chapter -The last of the rhinos- from his book The Twilight of India's Wild Life, published in 1969 by London: John Baker Publishers.



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