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Elephant (*Elephas maximus*) in
Corbett National Park

Photo : Narendra Singh

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THE VANISHING RHINO OF INDIA

BY

LATE M.D.CHATURVEDI

Trigger-Happy hunters with their blinding flash lights, high-velocity weapons, ubiquitous jeeps and easy consciences have brought about the extinction of about 30 species of mammals during the last hundred years. The species that readily succumbed to this wanton assault were naturally those that lacked alacrity, finesse, and ability to fend for themselves. Among such helpless creatures, the Indian rhino* stands high on the list of those that are on their way out.

Born and bred in the land of Buddha and Gandhi, the Indian rhino is meek and mild and not half-so-wild as it looks. Unlike its ferocious and unpredictable African cousins, the Indian rhino loves to live and let live. As further evidence of its non-violent nature, it considers two horns a needless ostentation. It sports only one, more as a symbol of its might rather than a weapon for fight. Even at bay it seldom gores its enemy; it prefers to bite. The horn is much more in evidence in the training of a baby by its mother.

Pre-historic Prodigy

Its enormous size, the armour-plate studded with tubercles that it wears, and the single horn that adorns its nose strike awe and compel respect from other denizens of the forest. The elephant, the lord of the animal kingdom, gives it a wide berth; the tiger slinks away at its sight; and the panther hides its hide in mortal dread. No animal wants to measure its strength against that of this veritable monster which seems to have walked straight out of the dinosaurian days.

This pre-historic whale of an animal, reminiscent of the mastodons that stalked the earth in ancient times, once frequented the entire marshy tract skirting the Himalayas extending well over 1,500 miles.

Recent excavations which unearthed a pre-Aryan civilization

*The great Indian one-horned rhinoceros : *Rhinoceros unicornis*.

at Mohenjodaro and Harappa in the northwest of India around B.C. 2,500—1,500, revealed the place of pride the rhino enjoyed in that dim and distant past. The vast majority of seals of that period preserved at the National Museum in New Delhi depict the rhino as the insignia of their might. The lion had to wait for recognition as a royal emblem until Emperor Ashoka appeared on the scene, 264 B.C.

Babar, the founder of the Mughal Empire in India referred to the rhino in his hunting exploits in the Indus Valley around 1525. It was about the same time that the King of Cambay (north of Bombay) sought to impress King Emanuel I of Portugal by presenting him with one of his palace pets, a rhino which in captivity would eat out of your hand. The Royal household in Lisbon must have had a fit at the sight of this so-called pet.

Massive Monster

Looking like nothing on earth (except like other rhinos) this great one-horned creature is more like a Patton tank of the animal kingdom careering about on its stumpy legs absent-mindedly in mud and slush. In this gigantic Goliath, weighing 1.5 to 2 metric tonnes*, one begins to suspect Nature indulging in a caricature of its other creatures, but not for long. One soon gets used to the impossible proportions of a 3.5 metres long body supported by short legs measuring no more than 75 cms. Its shoulder height is approximately 180 cms for male and 160 cms for female.

For an animal conceived on such pharaohick dimensions, it has tiny eyes stuck like beads on the side of its head half way between its erect ears and nostrils. Its unseeing eyes are largely responsible for unexpected encounters with this otherwise well intentioned beast. The mother with a calf, however, must never be treated lightly and should be given a wide berth.

The rhino has but one consuming passion in its life, and that is

*Male 2070; female 1,608 Kgms.—Basle Zoo.

to feed itself. While its black African counterpart lives on protein-rich leaf-fodder, the Indian rhino has to make do only with grass. What its intake lacks in quality has to be made up in quantity. It devotes most of its wakeful hours in devouring vast quantities of grass which it disposes off like a lawn-mover. It settles down to its gargantuan meal in the evening and feeds practically throughout the night. To escape fleas and flies it wallows in muddy holes during the heat of the day. It avoids running streams. At a pinch it swims like a whale with its horn on its nose held high and ears sticking out.

Dull-Witted Dodo

Having never faced any struggle for its existence, the rhino has had no need to develop any of its senses of perception. It hears little and sees less. It lacks finesse and is devoid of even a semblance of intelligence. All it needs is to smell its way to a good grazing ground where it encounters little competition from its associates of the deer tribe and domestic cattle. Unlike other animals, it seldom senses danger and is apt to tarry around even when it does. The rhino is a lone traveller. It loves its own company, and avoids intruders. It does not mind cattle and is often seen grazing along with buffaloes. It makes an exception, however, in the case of egrets which are often found riding on its back feasting on the ticks which the folds of its skin harbour. Unwittingly, these birds betray the whereabouts of their host, and act as veritable call-birds for poachers.

In its personal habits this wallower-in-the-mud has a peculiar instinct to go to the same place to drop its dung. The dung-heaps provide another clue of its proximity to the hunter.

Unwilling Breeder

The rhino is a reluctant breeder pace its proverbial horn. It takes a lot to coax the male to take notice of the advances of the female which take the form of a shrill whistle. In heat at regular intervals of about 45 days, the female pants and hisses and is generally

*Record 24". British Museum, London—E.P.Gee.

off feed. At Whipnade, the administration of sex hormones to the male was successfully tried in overcoming its aversion to mating.

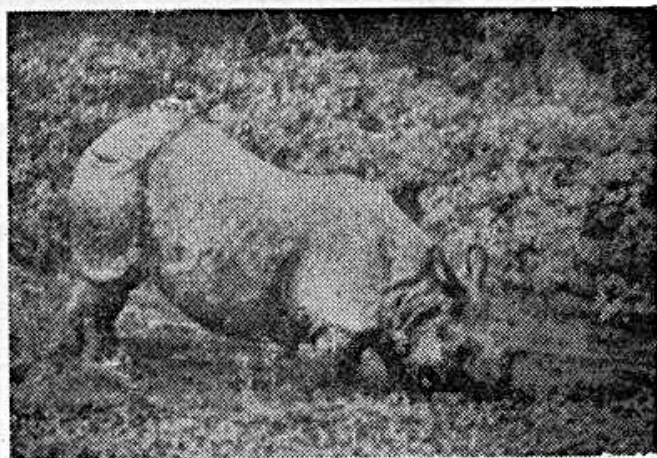
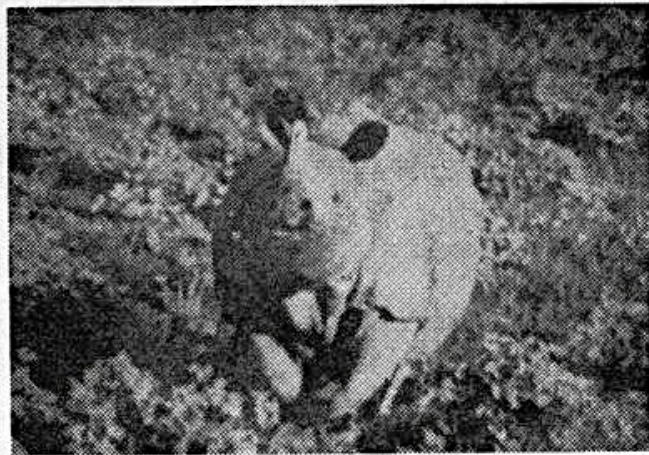
The gestation period is about 16 months, (Whipnade, 488 days; Basle 476 days). A single hornless offspring is born which keeps to its mother's heels for close on 2 years. Babies at birth weigh around 65 kilograms and tape about 125 cms in length. Like horses, the mother seldom licks its offspring.

The rhino's span of life is believed to be about 50 years. In the London and Berlin Zoos the Indian rhinos lived for a period of 40 and 36 years respectively, not counting the age at which they were imported.

With no natural enemies, the rhino should have multiplied like the rabbit in Australia or the spotted deer in the Andamans. Instead, it is on its way out all over its haunts in Southeast Asia and Africa. The woolly European rhino became extinct during the glacial epoch. Two species of the rhino disappeared from India as late as during the nineteenth century. And our one-horned survivor no longer frequents its former haunts which once extended from the Indus to the Brahmaputra. It is now on its last legs biding its time in a tiny corner in the northeast. It would have disappeared like other members of its tribe, had special protection not been extended to it in the sanctuaries created for the purpose.

Hunter's Horn

Having no enemies to contend with in Nature, the rhino does the next best thing. And that is to grow its own enemy in the shape of the horn on its nose. Measuring between 12" to 15", the horn is worn by both sexes*. It is composed of solid ceratin of fibrous tissue suggesting modified hair. This solitary horn just sits on the nose, and if lost by accident grows again like one's nail. It is not connected with the bones of the skull as is the case with the horns of cattle and antlers of deer. The average weight of the horn of a mature rhino is around 1,200 grams (max. recorded 1,776 gms.).



Rhinoceros in Kaziranga National Park.

The horn has been endowed with fantastic aphrodisiac properties throughout Southeast Asia and China. Auctions in Assam during 1962 and 1965 fetched about 80 U.S. cents per gram of the horn. Its retail price would be about the same as that of gold.

People who pay such fancy prices for its horn are blissfully ignorant of the fact that the rhino which wears it is by no means noted for its potency. At Whipsnade, a young rhino had to be given a dose of hormones before it mated. Its celebrated horn proved of little avail in the matter. Nor do the so-famed aphrodisiac properties of the rhino horn find any support in the meticulous analysis carried out by Swiss Chemists.

But superstitions die hard. The fame that the horn has enjoyed through the ages persists despite all efforts to enlighten its gullible dupes. Not only its horn, but also its bones, blood, flesh and even urine have been vested with mystical properties. In Nepal, children wear its teeth as a charm to ward off the evil eye. Dried blood is used in indigenous medicines and fetches about a U.S. dollar a pound. Rhino horn cups were used in royal households in the Orient for detecting poison in drink and for imparting potent powers to water drunk from it. It is not easy to dispel the spell cast by the rhino on the credulous masses.

The horn, however, constitutes the chief attraction. At the Raffles museum in Singapore a stuffed rhino was deprived not only of its original horn, but also of its papier mache substitutes twice. It is for this nugget of gold on its nose that the rhino has been hunted through the ages. The temptation that its horn offers to the jungle folks is irresistible. They devise draconian methods like snaring, pitting and netting the rhino. The quarry provides a large target for the bow and arrow and for modern weapons it is not a sitting but a sleeping duck.

Not having learnt to protect itself, the rhino is doomed to extinction. Even in sanctuaries created solely for its protection in Assam

and Bengal, it leads a precarious existence. The other day five rhino horns were caught by the Calcutta Customs booked from Assam as cycle parts for onward transmission.

Sprawling over 166 sq miles along the bank of the Brahmaputra, the Kaziranga Sanctuary is fast becoming a rhino farm for poachers. They killed 37 rhinos in 1967 alone! This concentration of rhinos in a single area is like keeping all our eggs in one basket and asking for trouble. The total number of rhinos now left in its existing habitat (including Nepal) would scarcely add up to 750, a number far below the critical point of the survival of such an unwieldy animal so unwilling to regenerate itself and so intent on committing *harakari*. The hunter has little to fear from this dullard of a dodo. If the horn had been mounted on the tiger or the bear, it would have been a different story.

Road to Extinction

India has already lost a smaller model of the one-horned rhino (*R. sondaicus*) which is now on its last legs in Burma, Malaya, Java and Borneo. Likewise has vanished the only two-horned diminutive species of India now known as the Sumatran rhino (*Didermocerus sumatrensis*) which occurs in limited numbers all over Southeast Asia, except in Java. The number of these vanishing survivors will not exceed a few hundreds.*

Of the two-horned African species, the black rhino (*Diceros bicornis*)—that runaway tractor—is able to fend for itself in South Abyssinia, East Nigeria and around Lake Chad. The two-horned white giant (*Ceratotherium simum*), next in size only to the elephant, has been rehabilitated in the Garamba National Park in the north of the Congo, in Zululand, and in the Kruger National Park. Their numbers are still in thousands and not in hundreds like those of the Asian species.

India owes not only to itself, but to the world at large to save

from extinction its only surviving link with its ancient past in the shape of its one-horned rhino. It would be advisable to disperse this national asset in other suitable areas as an insurance against any mishap which might overtake this helpless animal in its existing haunts which are only too prone to natural calamities like earthquakes and floods. If the rhino can breed freely at the zoos at Whippsnade and Basle, it can be trusted to look after itself in other more hospitable regions in India and elsewhere.

Note:- The advice tendered by this legendary Forester and Wildlife Conservationist, Late M.D. Chaturvedi, was blissfully heeded by Uttar Pradesh government and reintroduced one horned Indian Rhino to Dudhwah National Park in 1984 . Five rhinos initially inducted into the Park have now multiplied to 15. This is one of the success stories in the field of Wildlife Conservation

— Editor

*The European woolly rhino, dating back to Upper Eocene became extinct long long ago. (R. antiquitatis)