



The Story of India's Unicorns

by Divyabhanusinh, Asok Kumar Das,
and Shibani Bose

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Reviewed by: **Gayatri W. Ugra**

The Greater One-horned Rhino is the subject of this latest addition to the natural history series from The Marg Foundation, which previously gave us memorable volumes on Asia's lions and Asia's elephants. It brings together the formidable expertise of its authors in the fields of art, culture, history, and natural sciences.

Divyabhanusinh is well-known to BNHS as a dedicated conservationist and historian, with a special interest in large cats, and as a past Vice President of the Society. His first chapter, "India's Unicorns", places the Indian Rhino and its conspecifics in an evolutionary context. The Greater One-horned Rhino, as we know it now, appeared in the mid Pleistocene. It was named *Rhinoceros unicornis* by the father of binomial nomenclature, Carl Linnaeus himself. Known as *gainda* in Hindi, it has even been referred to as *gaur* (not to be confused with Gaur *Bos gaurus*). In Sanskrit, the rhino is called *kbadga*, which means sword or scimitar, referring to the horn. All these reflect the physical power of this animal, which has a shoulder height of

175–200 cm and tips the scales at 2,000 kg. The rhino's horn has a maximum recorded length of 61 cm (24 inches) (page 23). Unfortunately for India's Unicorn, it pays with its life for this unique physical feature.

Divyabhanusinh also contributes chapters 6 and 7, "Under the British and Beyond", and "Resurrection of the Unicorn". In chapter 6, accounts of various shikar experiences provide much valuable information on the natural history and interspecific interactions, including conflicts, regarding our unicorn. Abdul Halim Sharar's classic *Lucknow: THE LAST PHASE OF AN ORIENTAL CULTURE* records in some detail that these unicorns were kept in the Nawabs' menageries and made to fight not only among themselves but with tigers, leopards, and elephants. The illustrations in this chapter are particularly interesting.

Chapter 7 "Resurrection..." informs us that in Ayurveda the meat of rhino was recommended, while "the horn had no specific use", whereas in Unani medicine, the horn continues to be used, though in diminishing quantities due to its high price and other factors. The author points out that the demand in India

may have reduced, but poaching continues. Other major threats to the rhino population are the annual flooding of Brahmaputra river in Assam, road kills, and the possibility of an epidemic devastating its populations. Divyabhanusinh says "When the population of a species reduces to such an extent that it becomes necessary to count its individuals, it is a warning bell loud and clear for all to hear." The rhino's "horn of despair is a monument to the greed, folly and ignorance of human beings, for it cannot do for them what they believe it can." Yet, he ends on a positive note, "Its resurrection from supposedly less than 200 in 1900 to more than 3,500 in 2015 is impressive. Assam is home to 70% of this population." These numbers speak volumes for the state's commitment to conservation action.

Asok Kumar Das is a senior art historian with a doyen's knowledge of Mughal art in all its forms. His chapter 4 "The Unicorn and the Great Mughals" begins with a gripping account of Zahiruddin Mohammad Babur's first encounter with rhinos "during his entry into Hindustan at a place called Kargkhana or 'rhino-home' in a thickly wooded tract close to the Swat river." The author informs us that this hunt is graphically described in Babur's *Memoirs*, originally written in his mother tongue Chaghatai Turki, and illustrated in three of the four illustrated Farsi (Persian) versions of *Baburnama*, in which the hunt is described in detail. Among the other paintings mentioned in the chapter, particularly interesting are two images, a powerful one from the *Hamzanama* of an unnamed Muslim hero fighting a duel with a gigantic black warrior astride a rhino (page

68), juxtaposed against a painting of Majnu in the wilderness, a muted composition with numerous large and small animals, and a pair of rhinos in the foreground (page 69).

Asok Kumar Das's Chapter 5 "At Large in Art and Culture" mentions that the rhino was not associated with any major god or goddess, but cites an exception – a relief at Angkor Wat in Cambodia, where the vedic god Agni is shown riding a chariot drawn by a rhinoceros. The chapter mentions depictions of the rhino in manuscripts, sculpture in stone and terracotta, carpets and textiles, from periods not covered in the rest of the book.

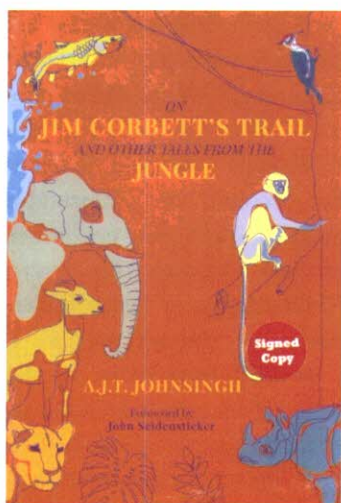
Shibani Bose has contributed chapter 2 "Before the Written Word" and chapter 3 "A Search through Antiquity", bringing to the volume

knowledge of the Indian Rhino starting with the fossil record through protohistory, and through the ages to the edicts of Ashoka (268–232 BCE), so "we may reconstruct the story of the animal's journey across millennia before it disappeared from most regions of the Indian Subcontinent". The photograph (page 37) of the shoulder blade of an Indian Rhino from Laghnaj, Gujarat, which has hammer marks (the author calls them pits), indicating its use as an anvil, tells a whole story in itself. So do mesolithic rock paintings, like the one from Jaora, Madhya Pradesh, depicting a man caught between a rhino and a wild boar (page 41).

Chapter 3 tells us what the records of Western travellers say about this unique large mammal. From Quintus Curtius Rufus (100

CE) we learn of Alexander rousing his soldiers for the conquest of the East, where they were told that the region was abundant in timber and rhinos, an item of trade in *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (1st century CE). Aelian's *On the Peculiarities of Animals* mentions a horn brought from India, to which are attributed all kinds of magical properties (p. 59).

Kakubhai Kothari's photographs of rhinos in the wild add much visual interest to the volume. This review provides only a smattering of the vast body of detailed facts about the Greater One-horned Rhinoceros covered by the authors. For their analyses and conclusions, and referenced sources for further exploration, the reader is urged to turn to the book, which at Rs 2,000/- is a bargain. ■



On Jim Corbett's Trail and Other Tales from the Jungle

by A.J.T. Johnsingh

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Reviewed by: **Kumaran Sathasivam**

Dr A.J.T. Johnsingh grew up in a small town close to the southern tip of India. When he was a schoolboy, he chanced upon a Tamil translation of Jim Corbett's *MAN-EATERS OF KUMAON*. He was stirred by Corbett's descriptions of Kumaon, with its

forests full of Tiger and Sambar, and its rivers full of the Golden Mahseer. This was the beginning of a great fascination with the author and the land he wrote about. It was not long before the young Johnsingh had read all of Corbett's books.

Johnsingh was also inspired by Corbett to write of his experiences

in the wild. He was to have a great many of these experiences in the following years. Beginning as a naturalist, he grew into a professional wildlife biologist. Indeed, he carried out the first scientific research by an Indian biologist on a free-ranging large mammal. In the 1970s, he carried out a doctoral study on the Dhole, or Asian Wild Dog, in Bandipur. Thanks to both his profession, which involved studying and conserving wildlife, and his passion, he has "walked hundreds of kilometres through dense bush and tall grass, ideal resting places for all forms of potentially dangerous animals".

What is it like to go for a walk in a forest with Dr Johnsingh? In the foreword, John Seidensticker draws our attention to Johnsingh's good humour, his joy at walking in the forest and his awareness of all that is going on around him.