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## **Netizen Perception on the burning of 2479 Stockpile Single-Horn Rhino in Assam in three social media platform**

--Rupa Rani Sonowal & N Atungbou

### **Abstract**

Posts related to animals and environment attracted social media users but not without reaction which suggests nature and society, and companionship. One horn rhino has a special place in the heart of people of Assam illuminated in folktales, songs, literature, and crafts. Often this beautiful creature falls prey to the poachers lured by trade value. On 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2021, Assam Government burnt down world's largest confiscated stockpile of 2479 of Rhino's horn, coinciding with World Rhino Day aims to dispel myths associated with market value. Social media users have reacted through shared, liked, and commented on government's action vis-à-vis economy, religion, arts, tourism, and research, acclamatory and disapproval. Drawing on this event, the study locates how meanings are perceived, constructed in three prominent social media platforms and analysed through 'Need-to-belong', 'Self-Worth-Self-Esteem', and 'Idealized-Virtual-Identity' framework. Study observed, YouTube is inclined toward the government's action while Facebook and Twitter posts were skeptical of the event.

*Keywords: Rhino, Stockpile, Assam, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube*

### **Introduction**

Rhinoceroses is one of the largest perissodactyla animals that have always been accentuated around the globe. The earliest known rhinoceros are from the late Eocene deposits in Asia, North America and Europe resembling early horses and tapirs that are delicate, small and with no horns. The present form of modern rhinoceros resembles the Rhinocerotidae family that appeared in the late Eocene but were less dominant than the other families (Dinerstein, 2003). Rhinoceros can be identified with five different species, out of which three are in Asia and two in Africa. Javan, Sumatran, and African black rhinos are in a

critical situation and considered as an endangered animal (WWF, 2019). The root cause of rhinoceros's decreasing number of population can be traced centuries back when they were hunted for agriculture pests, meat, trophies, and skin used for shield, good luck charm, handles for ceremony daggers and horns for the traditional medicinal practices. Later, the animal's habitat degraded due to the management practices and human settlement (Amin et al., 2006). In recent times, it has captured people's curiosity and concern due to the steady stream of poaching and trading of its horn. For decade conservationists have been campaigning for heightening the awareness among the public (Tosh, 2015). In this critical juncture, the media played a vital role in disseminating the information about the extinction of Rhino. The plight of African rhinos in the media landscape is well-taken but not on the Asian rhino. However, what captures the most, of the Asian Rhino is the recent burning of stockpile horn in Assam and the people's reaction in different social media platforms.

Social media has occupied an important platform in the contemporary world where people seek, consume, be it news or entertainment due to its low cost, easy accession, and fast transformation of information. The latest figure indicates that 4.9 billion people accessed the Internet in 2021, roughly 63 per cent of the world's population, an increase of 17 per cent since 2019, and almost 800 million estimated to have accessed online (ITU, 2021). Statista (2021) reported that India's digital population is growing over 680 million, and presently social media penetration is 32.5% among the global active users. Public's accession to the internet gave a new avenue of interaction in social media, a platform for discussion, and debates on important social issues on regular occurrence. Time and again, animal concerns have occupied an important space, contents were created and shared on various social media platforms, characterised the relationship and companionship between human and animal. The content can influence perceptions on certain issues that have greater impact on the public's sentiments. Within its parameters of information, netizen consumption can be diverse, informative, crucial, and also controversial and over-exaggerated (Lyngdoh, Dixit, and Sinha, 2017, p.

564). In 2018, there was a strong reaction to the death of the last male northern white rhino and drew interest even from the western countries (WWF 2018). Issue pertaining to rhino poaching has little direct experience, where the public is reliant on social media for information. Nevertheless, social media could mold by emphasizing directly connected to the public and pressurize the decision makers to take actions in preserving biodiversity (Fink, Hausmann, and Di Minin, 2020, p.1).

Such is the case of the one horn rhinoceros, home to the iconic Kaziranga National Park (KNP), cultural heritage and natural treasures of Assam, India. Its representation is ingrained into the folktales, political movement, songs, literature, and the crafts of Assam. Nevertheless, this symbolic animal has been killed by the poachers and smugglers for horn to be sold illegally at the international market. The cases have been reported in both local print and electronic media for many years. However, the incumbent Assam Government, on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2021, made a stand to burn down the world's largest stockpile confiscated Rhino's horn, accumulated since 1979. The event coincided with World Rhino Day, and the aim of the government is to dispel the myth associated with the horns that drove the poachers and illegal trade at the international market. The incident took place in the Bokakhat, headquarter of the Kaziranga National Park and Tiger Reserve. Before the event, 2,623 horns have been examined by the high-level committee, out of which 94 are preserved for the academic and 50 for the court cases, while the rest are confined to flames (GoA, 2021).

Nonetheless, the public have reacted to the government's action by sharing, commenting, and criticising on various social media platforms. Generally, posts related to animals and conservation have always attracted a number of users. Taking the cue from the event, the paper posited how news or posts related to the iconic species of Assam and the burning of the stockpile of 2479 horns of single-horned Rhino presented in the social media. Further, the study explores how the recipient perceived information presented on social media. Considering the accessibility, for this study, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter

have been selected for the representation of digital media platforms while leaving out WhatsApp as it is more on the encryption protocol. A total of 688 comments on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter have been culled from the first post of each platform. Based on the comments made on three different digital platforms, thematically analysed emphasising on the reactions to the burning of 2479 single-horned Rhino of Assam vis-à-vis economy, religion, arts, tourism, and research, and acclamatory and disapproval of the government's action. The paper is analysed within the framework of 'need to belong' (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), 'self-worth and self-esteem' (Nadkarni and Hofmann, 2012), and 'idealized virtual identity' (Back et al., 2010). Paper is structured into rhino in historical period, rhino in Assamese Society, rhino on the brink of extinction, burning of the Stockpile, methodological frame, data analysis, discussion, and conclusion.

### **Rhino in Historical Period**

The archaeological findings suggest that the rhino flourished across the subcontinent dating back to the Harappa civilization from 2,600 to 1,900 BC (Bose 2020; Divyabhanusinh, Das, and Bose, 2018). Further south in India excavated the unearthed artifacts of rhinoceros in several early Bronze Age sites (WWF 2016b). Gupta Empire (5<sup>th</sup> Century) minted coins showing the king on horseback attacking a rhino (Mintage World, 2015). Thousand years later, the Mughal emperors frequently depicted rhinos beautifully in illuminated manuscripts (Ali, 1927; WWF, 2016b). The first ever rhino believed to be seen in Europe was in 1515. It was sent from India to the Portuguese King. Later the King offered to the pope as a gift but died on the way to Rome due to shipwreck. The animal was immortalized through the artwork of German artist Albrecht Dürer (Biedermann, Gerritsen, and Riello, 2018, p. 18). Well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century, for 300 years, rhinoceros had been the Europeans imagination through Dürer's artwork. In some areas, this animal was domesticated, and used for ploughing. During the 18th century, the Nawabs of Lucknow, kept menageries of more than ten rhinos. Jean-Baptiste Chevalier's account noted how local rulers organised an event of rhino's

carnage for their pleasure and entertainment purposes in the 19th century (Talbot, 1960, p.198). Big hunting expeditions were the main attraction for the Europeans who came to India. In Nepal, royal hunting in Chitwan continued well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When Britain's King George V was crowned Emperor of India in 1911, he proceeded to Nepal for hunting (Rookmaaker, Nelson, and Dorrington, 2005; WWF, 2016b).

### **Rhino in Assamese Society**

The one horn rhinoceros represents the cultural heritage and natural treasure of Assamese society. The animal has been a longstanding symbol of pride, used in government signage and brand logos. Its representation is ingrained in the folktales, political movement, literature, and the crafts of Assam. The legend was told that:

*“Lord Krishna came riding on a Rhino from Dwarka to rescue his grandson Aniruddha from the King Ban of Sonitpur. While on his expedition, he let the Rhino graze in Kaziranga as he had to cross the Brahmaputra to wage war against the King. After the war, the King called Rhino by playing the flute to return but inaudible to the Rhino due to the sound of the flowing river. As the rhino failed to respond to the call, Lord Krishan was annoyed and proceeded to Dwarka without taking his mount. Nevertheless, the rhino loved the place and decided to stay.”* (Divyabhanusinh, Das and Bose, 2018).

Through the prism of folk stories and arts, rhinoceros found a space in the hearts of the people of Assam. In addition, regional pride and possessiveness over the rhino have stirred in the past due to refusal to relocate rhinoceros outside the state. The local pride is helpful in conservation initiatives, as this animal is the inhabitants in most parts of the Indo-Gangetic and Brahmaputra in Assam. Well, 70 percent of the Rhino population found in Kaziranga National Park was first notified as a rhino conservation region in 1908(Puri and Joshi, 2018, p. 307). The Department of Forest of Assam has made an enormous contribution in rhino conservation that has built up its population to 1,855 in Kaziranga National Park, 68 in Orang National Park and 81 in

Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary. The Rhino translocation to the Manas National Park from Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary is one of the success stories of the Indian Rhino Vision 2020 Program that made it possible for the breeding population of the Rhinos (Bonai, Talukdar, and Sharma, 2009, p.8).

In the political narrative, the genesis of projection of Rhino as the pride of Assam is associated with the Assam Movement (1979-85) linked to the indigenous people's control over land, resources, and influx of illegal immigrants (Agarwala, 2021). The Assam movement found its root in anti-foreigner issues due to the influx of immigrants from the neighbouring countries. Conservation in Assam was initiated by the European Colonial amid the protest by the locals. There in, the federal rule was imposed in the state of Assam in 1985, when the movement took place against the immigrants by the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and took refuge in the Manas National Park. Leading to which the Indian army was called in and drove one of the successful operations known as 'Operation Rhino' (Bhaumik, 2007, p. 4). This was the first of its kind where an animal was invoked for its operation. From 1990 to 2009, quite a few conflict situations took place between the paramilitary forces combined with police, forest guards and armed insurgents, and poachers. The government's anti-poaching drive is the other factor that created acceding to evictions of certain villages from the nearby Kaziranga National Park (KNP). The presence of rhino in the political discourse became an integral part of the election campaign connecting with 'pride of Assam'. During the parliamentary election in 2014, BJP Prime Ministerial Candidate accused the Indian National Congress-led government in Assam for the decreasing number of Rhino in Assam (Agarwala, 2021). The campaign claimed that the Congress led government had conspired to bring in undocumented immigrants from Bangladesh by providing a place in the marshes of KNP by replacing Rhinoceros from their natural habitat (Barbora, 2017, p.1145). Political narrative emphasises on the influx of undocumented immigrants as one of the reasons for diminishing rhinos in Assam.

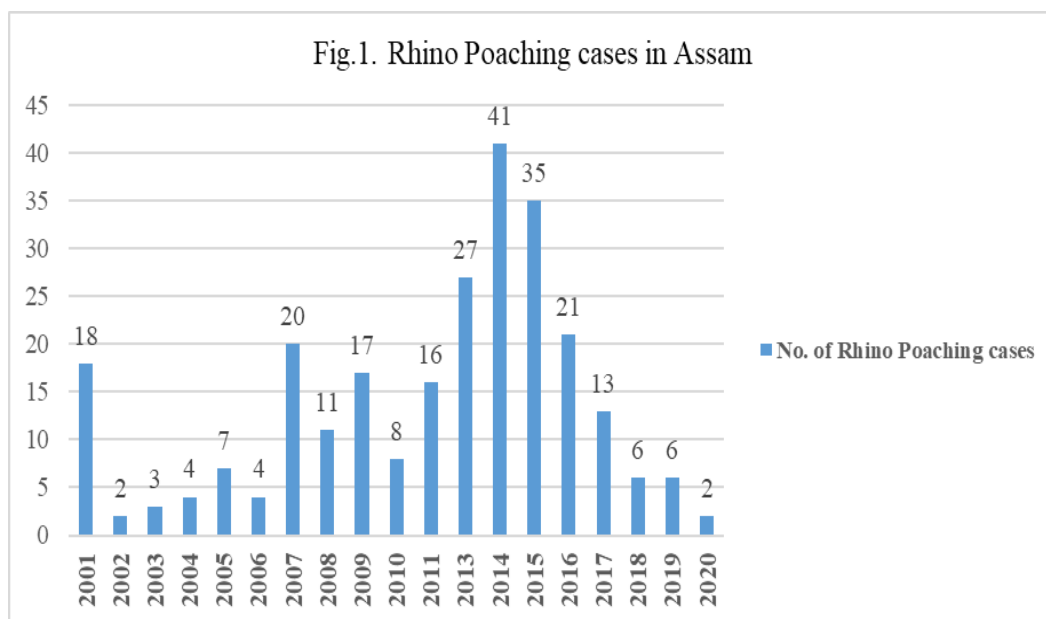


### **Rhino on the brink of extinction**

The symbolism and greatness of this animal is on the brink of extinction due to poaching, massive hunting for illegal trading, sacrificial, entertainment and other purposes. History was told about the royal hunting expeditions on the Rhino to offer at the holy site once in their lifetime (Rookmaaker, Nelson, and Dorrington, 2005, pp. 89-90). In addition, rhino horns have been smuggled from various parts of Asia for medicinal use especially for the traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). Hence, it is traded illegally, consumed in TCM and among other usages (Cheung et al, 2018, p. 133). Internationally, since 1977, under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, trade on rhino horn has been banned (Biggs et al., 2013, p.1038). This, however, continued illegally as demand from Asia drove the poaching activity into this part of the region as well. Regulatory enforcement has failed causing wildlife protection to turn into militarization and propelling the black-market prices. Nevertheless, legalization has been proposed, a potential solution, wherein improved enforcement, funded by the sales of horn from natural mortalities, existing stockpiles, and harvesting through dehorning (Biggs et al., 2013; Cheung et al., 2018).

Besides, increase in human population, settlement, habitat destruction for crops and developmental activities, encroaching on natural habitat, resulted in severe conflicts between humans and wildlife (Choudhury, 2014; Vigne and Martin, 1994). By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the presence of rhino in the agricultural land was threatened, so the local rhino populations were eradicated to meet the demand of growing human populations. Human encroachment on protected forest reserves increased manifold reducing the habitation space for the rhino. In addition, limited local gene pools and direct conflict with humans damaged the strength of the Rhino population. In the dawn of the 20th century, it has become clear that the survival of the rhino was in question, and it is estimated that fewer than 200 one horned rhino remained in the wild (WNET 2020). In the context of Assam, the data show that number of cases of rhino poaching have reported and killed upto 527 during 1981 and 2001 (GoA, 2021). From

2001 to 2020, two hundred fifty-three have been reported to be killed (GoA, 2021; WPSI, 2018). In 2001, eighteen rhinos were killed and seventy-two in 2011 in Kaziranga National Park. The highest figures in a decade were reported in 2013 (twenty-seven), 2014 (forty-one) and 2015 (thirty-five) with a total of one hundred-three. The figure decreased to twenty-one in 2016 and thirteen in 2017, six in 2018 and 2019, and two in 2020 were reported that show drastically reduced. According to the 13<sup>th</sup> Rhino Census Report of 2018, there are 2,413 rhinos in Kaziranga alone.



**Source:** Forest Dept, GoA; WPSI's Rhino Poaching Statistics, 2015-2018

This reduction in poaching may be due to the increase in anti-poaching activities conducted by the NGOs, forest department, police, and the locals. According to Uttam Saikai, Honorary Wildlife Warden of Kaziranga:

*“In the past when a rhino was killed people would not find out but now with social media, it becomes a news item. Statistically, poaching has come down, you cannot really say whether the government should be credited, or numerous NGOs which have been working actively on the ground to raise awareness.”* (Agarwala, 2021).

### Burning of the Stockpile

As the cases of poaching and killing of rhinos have been reported over many decades. The government, during the past decades has seized a number of rhino horns and kept them under its control. Policies have been made in several countries to address the poaching case, but it continued poaching and illegal selling of the rhino horn. To address this issue, in recent times, several countries have come up with alternative ways, by destroying the ivory stockpiles, demonstrating not to tolerate crime against the wildlife, ensuring never will be sold, and must end the senseless slaughter of animals. The burning of ivory goes back to Kenya in 1989, the then Kenyan President burned 12 tonnes of elephant tusks and helped change the global approach on ivory exports(Zane 2016). Following which, in 2015, Mozambique burned over 440 pounds of rhino horn, came from a police seizure (Vaughan 2015). Celso Correia, Minister for Land, Environment and Rural Development stated:

*"Today sends a signal Mozambique will not tolerate poachers, traffickers and the organised criminals which employ and pay them to kill our wildlife and threaten our communities."* (Guardian, 2015)

For the second time, on 30 April 2016, Kenyan President ignited the largest piles consisting of 105 tonnes of elephant ivory and 1.35 tonnes of horns (Duggan, Kriel, and Cuevas 2016; WWF 2016a). Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta told the crowd:

*"The rising value of elephant ivory trade, illegally on the international market, has resulted in a massacre in the rainforest of Africa. In 10 years in Central Africa, we have lost as many as 70% of the elephants. The elephant, as has been said, is an iconic symbol of our country. Unless we take action now, we risk losing this magnificent animal."* (CNN, 2016)

Echoing the effort made by the Kenyan Government, world renowned conservationist Richard Leakey express that:

*“The slaughter of rhinos is driven by trade in rhino horn. Burning it and ridiculing those who value it is an excellent idea. And those who try to sell it should be publicly condemned as they deliberately try to make personal profit on extinction of rhinos” (Guardian, 2017)*

In Europe, the Czech Republic was the first to burn 50 kilograms of rhino horn in 2014, in a bid to help conserve rhinos(Hance 2014). Přemysl Rabas, Director of Dvůr Králové Zoo express that:

*“It is necessary to show clearly that the situation of rhinos in the wild is critical and that it is the demand for rhino horn that drives them towards extinction. Burning itself is a symbolic event that calls on everyone to reconsider consequences of her/his behaviour. By buying rhino horn you are funding the criminal gangs and poachers. Because of smuggling and trading in rhino horn, the rangers are killed, inhabitants of poor African regions are terrorized, and beautiful animals are destined to suffer cruel death. Its consistency is like the consistency of human nails or hair.” (ME News, 2014)*

Richard Leakey, a renowned conservationist expressed the impact of burning down the ivory in different decades show the positivity on the mind-set of the people:

*"Many people cannot understand why destroying rhino horns is the best thing. When we burned ivory in Kenya at the end of the 1980s, its price dropped rapidly in about half a year as the demand for it was dramatically reduced. Apparently, people have already begun to realise that the cost for purchasing ivory items is animal lives."*

(WFL, 2017)

The Dvur Kralove Zoo organised a ‘Burn Horns Save Rhinos’ campaign in partnership with the Customs Administration of the Czech Republic, and for the second time in 2016 burnt more than 33 kg of rhino horn(WFL 2017). The pile was ignited by Veronika Varekova, a Czech model in the presence of a Member of the African Wildlife Foundation board of trustees, and Paula

Kahumbu, Kenya's prominent conservationist. Speaking at the event, Veronica Varekova said:

*"We meet today for one simple reason - to show that the Czech Republic can be an important player in the field of nature conservation. While in South Africa these days, unfortunately, the first legal auctions of horns are taking place, we are destroying the rhino horn to symbolically point out that the trade in rhino horn is totally meaningless. I thank the Dvůr Králové Zoo for what it does."* (WFL, 2017)

The Dvůr Králové Zoo conducts long-term efforts to save rhinos and brings attention to the plight of rhinos worldwide and is supported by the renowned conservationists and celebrities alike. Speaking at the event, Director, Dvůr Králové Zoo Přemysl Rabas said:

*"If we do not fight the trade in rhino horn, the time will come soon when rhinos completely disappear from our planet. By burning rhino horn we want to send the world a clear message that horns belong to rhinos and not to people."* (WFL, 2017)

In June 2013, the Philippines destroyed the confiscated ivory since 2009, estimated to be US\$10 million and the first Asian country to do so by sending a message to other countries: "stop the ivory trade and don't put a value on the existing stocks" (Christy 2013). Mundita Lim, Director of Protected Areas and Wildlife Bureau (PAWB) says,

*"The destruction of the items would hopefully bring the Philippines' message across the globe that the country is serious and will not tolerate illegal wildlife trade and denounces the continuous killing of elephants for illicit ivory trade."* (National Geographic, 2013)

In January 2014, China destroyed 6.1 tonnes of ivory, a move welcomed by the conservationists, International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) and others, seen as a symbol of growing concern about the ivory crisis. China's destruction of tonnes of tusk is important, the country has been the world's

biggest market accounting for 70 percent of the demand (UNODC, 2020). In January 2016, the island nation, Sri Lanka destroyed 350 tusks crushed to the furnace (Jayasinghe, 2016). Colombo Customs Director said:

*“We are trying to demonstrate that there is no value for blood ivory... It is horribly cruel, and the elephants suffer for about a week before they die.”*  
(Quartz, 2016)

In September 2021, India burnt thousands of rhino horn stockpiles since 1979 sending an anti-poaching message to the poachers (Hussain, 2021). Speaking at the event, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said:

*“Trading in rhino horns must stop and the claim of these horns having medicinal properties is false”* (AP News, 2021)

The burning of a stockpile of ivory and rhino horns has generated massive social media opinion and comments. Social media, as one of the most attentive platforms for the contemporary generation, plays a vital role in disseminating the information, and knowledge on the importance of animals and its conservation policies. It is observed that awareness of the heritage and endangered species are also on the rise. A deep strength of feeling for this glorious natural heritage coupled with a growing awareness of the present generation, a tranche of efforts to save the rhino with the change in attitude across the regional boundaries. Whereas forefather organised hunting expeditions, sporting events to display and to be recognised in the social hierarchy, now prevented by the statute going after the animals. Wildlife sanctuaries

established, laying the foundations for conserving the value species, on which today's species are being protected. The presence of rhino in Assamese culture is time immemorial. News relating to rhinos, especially in relation to Kaziranga National Park have been highlighted in different media platforms. It is not always the killing of animals that is emphasized but related to the biodiversity that attracts netizen response to the issue concerning conservation

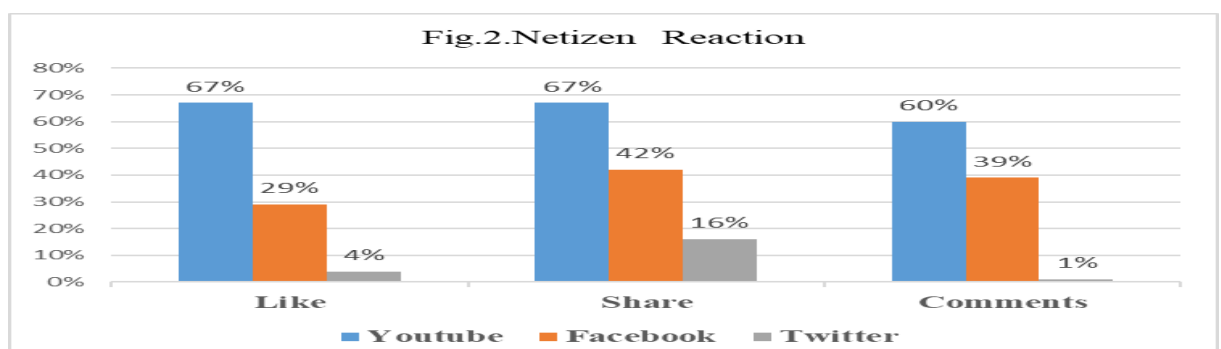
of iconic species such as rhinoceros on YouTube, Facebook, twitter, and online news contents. For instance, strong reaction to the death of the last male northern white rhino, drew interest even from the western countries, and pressured the decision makers to take actions which would contribute to preserving biodiversity (Fink, Hausmann, and Di Minin, 2020,p.1). Media is not merely generating public opinion but could mold by emphasizing certain voices in raising awareness the issues that are directly connected to the public gets more emphasis.

### **Methodological Framing**

Constant interaction is essential for the formation of meaningful interpersonal relationships, and in turn it creates an avenue for the need to belong (NTB). According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), NTB is found almost in human cultures, though intensity of expression varies. Projection of a group inclined towards sustaining social bonds facilitates defending the members of the group from external threats, entrails continuous interaction with others to build a cordial relationship. Stability in relationship and concern is formed providing a relational context and perception of bond essential for satisfying the need to belong (Baumeister and Leary, 1995,p. 497). The “need to belong” makes a basic point about human motivation and drive to form and maintain relationships with others. An individual who attributes a main role to others’ opinions in relation to themselves have a high need to belong (Morrison, Epstude, and Roese, 2012,p. 675). Closely associated with the ‘need to belong’ is self-worth and self-esteem, acting as a sociometer to monitor oneself for the acceptability in a group. If a warning is felt by the person due to a fall in self-esteem, it tends to take certain steps for inclusion to avoid rejections in the community (Nadkarni and Hofmann, 2012,p. 247). Self-esteem in the context of collectivism links members who consider themselves as part of the group(s) motivated by the norms, duties and prioritize the goal of the group over their own personal interest, emphasising connectedness to the members of the group. Whereas in the context of individualism, one is motivated by one's own interest and emphasises the rational analysis of

benefits in associating with others (Hamamura, 2012,p.3). Self presentation portrays or informs oneself to others by ways of presenting one-self to the expectation and preference of the audience, and to one's own self (Baumeister and Hutton, 1987,p. 71). Idealized-virtual identity hypothesis measured the profiles of social media (FB) users reflecting actual personality rather than self-idealization(Back et al., 2010, p.372). Participants expressed and communicated real personality rather than promoting idealized versions of themselves and the impressions made independently from the profiles were accurate, and an exception of emotional stability (Nadkarni and Hofmann, 2012,p.245).

**Data Analysis:** For this study, youtube, facebook and twitter were selected for representation of digital media platforms. The sample collected for the study is based on one single post. A framework is devised to retrieve from the post pertaining to the keyword such as “burning of rhino horn in Assam” from the search engine. The collected data were compiled and analysed based on the netizen ‘like’, ‘shared’ and ‘comments’ in three social media platforms. In the ‘like’ section (fig 2) of three social media platforms, 67% YouTube, followed by Facebook with 29% and 4%Twitter respectively have liked the event. In the ‘shared’ section (fig 2), 67% YouTube, followed by Facebook with 42% and 16% twitter respectively have shared with others the event of burning of rhino horn. And in the ‘comment’ section (fig 2), 60% YouTube, 39% Facebook and 2% Twitter respectively have commented on the event. From the ‘comment section’ on three social media platforms, sub-themes- for and against the government viz, economy, tourism, religion, art and medical research-has been extracted and analysed the text accordingly.





### ***Economy***

Economic benefits were discussed linked with the condition of the state's (Assam) economy. Discussion emphasized on the return from selling the horns in the international market and generating revenue for the government of Assam.

*"...our economy is not in a good shape; this is totally a stupidity of the government...use this as an asset! Use that money for a hospital or some school. Set an example by investing it for humanity. Instead of burning such valuable items. It will be better if our government sells them to the international market and collects a handsome fund for the welfare of those covid affected poor people. It can be auctioned and should give the money to the needy people of assam. State govt please can tell us what is the value of these horns in the international market? Is Assam too rich? It would be wise enough if we distribute it to all the countries in the world, one each to preserve in their museum so that at least the na..."* (Facebook, 2021)

It is observed that when the burning of the stockpile took place, the economy of the state is in shambles due to the covid-19 and lockdown, and the business is in suspended animation and the government election's promise of employment never takes place- though massive recruitment took place years later.

*"Sell them with that money and give it to me. I will buy piglets and raise them and during BIHU I will provide pork meat at a discount as you cannot give it to the government. Job for me atleast let me be helpful to you, mama (to Chief Minister of Assam)"* (Facebook, 2021)

The incident has made the netizens react in such a way that they could relate to their personal situation. As the horn would have brought personal benefits to people of Assam. With the money they would invest in business which would help them to generate income or useful for day-to-day life, as the government is not able to provide employment to the youth of Assam.

*“If they would give me one, then I would drink tea daily with it or fill petrol. I don't have artistic talents but instead of burning it out it would have been useful. Mama (pointing to cm) with that money I would have invested for an NGO with proper documentation, rhinos' death wouldn't have been dishonored, meaningless and in vain.”* (Facebook, 2021)

Comments also pointed on how to use the seized horn for the promotion of tourism, utilised in humanitarian aid, schools, or spent on welfare for the affected families and employees due to covid-19.

*“Saddening both Financially and Emotionally. The seized horns can be auctioned in the international market... to boost the tourism sector that suffered a major loss due to Pandemic. Nevertheless, drugs seized and destroyed is a praiseworthy step for the government of the day to prevent the menace of drugs in the society. Burning of horn, is the act of rational thought process. Drugs cannot be preserved in the museum, but rhino can. Museum preservation of rhino horn can earn resources, as people would like to glimpse at the iconic animal's horn. It is prudent upon the incumbent government to look beyond mega events, which may not serve any purpose in the long run. Government moves are primitive in nature. Further, selling the horn would generate good money to the state as the present economic status of Assam Government is not that conducive. In return, a good investment for the security of the rhino is the better option to preserve the animal. On the humanitarian ground the money could have been utilized in hospitals and in schools or assistance provided for the welfare of those covid affected poor people. But instead, the act of the government has resulted in the wastage of the national heritage of Assam.”* (Facebook, 2021)

Since March 2020, the state tourism has been severely affected and resulted in huge economic loss. To generate income for the concerned department, it is found that auctioning of horn is a better choice for the government instead of burning.

*“The horns seized can be auctioned in the international market and further be*

*used to boost the tourism sector that suffered a major loss due to the Pandemic. Drugs seized and destroyed is a praiseworthy step for ..."* (Facebook, 2021)

Some comments were made on the benefits of the horn from selling but with a proposal of stringent law to stop poaching or killing or selling in the illegal market.

*"Law needs to be strict, but seized horns need to be sold or kept by the government. And earn with them and use it for good works".* (Facebook, 2021)

In relation to the comments made by the social media users on the economic benefit of the seized horn vis-à-vis stringent law, some of the comments also made on wrong footing of auctioning or marketing of the horn would be equivalent to poachers and smugglers.

*"...if the govt will auction the horns then this kind of people will come and say that there is no difference between govt and poachers. Rhino horns are not to be auctioned or sold. Or else we will be doing the same thing as poachers. Then poachers would stop voting for them altogether. This move might seem bad, but if horns are sold then imagine the image of Assam tourism it will create around the world. People all over the world come to see one horned rhino in Assam. If the horns are sold, that won't be a good gesture."* (Facebook, 2021)

In responding to the comments made in favour of selling of horn to generate revenue for the state, comment was also made asking the netizen to inform the government the market value of the Rhino:

*"One horn rhino does not have a legal market...in black-market there was a price minimum 44-50 lakhs /KG. Those who think by selling horns, Assam will gain a lot of revenue then please inform the state govt about the legal market to sell these horns."* (Facebook, 2021)

Nevertheless, legalization of trade on rhino horn has been one of the proposals

as a step toward eradicating the illegal marketing (Biggs et al. 2013; Cheung et al. 2018). For many decades, hunting and poaching and illegal trading in the international market has been happening despite having stringent laws to deal with it but never stopped from doing it. In this regard (Lopes, 2019, p. 110) pointed out the ineffectiveness of trade bans in curbing poaching and suggested that corruption needs to be tackled to reduce this menace. In hindsight, legalisation on trading of this valued animal may not be the wisest of decisions but awareness as one of the solutions or way forward to stop poaching and illegal trading in any form. A study by Crookes and Blignaut (2015: 16) reveals the conventional demand for reduction strategies are unlikely to reduce poaching, instead consumer behaviour modification through education might be more effective.

### **Religion**

The event of burning of rhino horn started with the chanting of *slokas* from Veda by 21 priests where CM Himant Biswa Sharma presided over ‘*daha sankar*’ ritual. It is observed that description on the religious rituals and praising the present government also became part of the posts.

*“I did not know that Rhino horn follows any religion. Thanks for enlightening me that those rhino horns were followers of Hindu religion Puja with 21 priests while burning Rhino horns sent a message from Assam to the world to end superstition. Modi is a Viswaguru, Assam CM who is a world leader in the fight against superstition. I am proud.”*

(Twitter, 2021)

With regards to the religious chanting, the government was of the view that the purpose of chanting of *slokas* and ‘*daha Sanskar*’ ritual, is an attempt to send a message that rhinos are part of family, culture, and identity, and symbolic way to respect the dead animals. As a matter of fact, the religious chanting at the event of burning of the ivory or horn is not new to the world or India specific. Sri Lanka, in 2016, burnt the ivory with the religious ceremony

performed by the Buddhist monk, Hindu, Muslim and Christian representative, praying for the elephants who have lost their lives (Dashgupta, 2016). Well, one may say that religious chanting is a way forward to display the societal interconnection with the ecosystem as every species is in need of others as well for its existence.

### **Arts and Research**

Art, tourism, and research were some of the points raised by the netizen proposing that the rhino horn would have been crafted for, to exhibit and keep in museums, and utilised for medicinal purposes.

*“Such a foolish decision... There are great artists in Assam, they can craft it into a great work of art can't they make it an art exhibit on those Rhinos' memories? It can be beautifully crafted if given to any craftsman. And can be placed in museums.”* (Facebook, 2021)

Comments were made on consideration for the horn to be used in medical science as there is a scope for further research studies.

*“Instead of burning and wasting raw materials...could have utilised for medical research to make medicines...saved many lives... it has great demand due to medicinal properties... there is enough scope for future research...but what can we expect from this Government? 2,400 rhino horns = 2,400 rhinos killed/injured. Burning 2,400 rhino horns = no benefit. Auctioning off 2,400 rhino horns to 2,400 different “government” museums and research labs = efficient/educating/no air pollution. Worst decision ever. Are these people retarded.... Why make such a grand showbiz for this...”* (Youtube, 2021)

In relation to the research and academic purposes raised by the social media users, it is observed that, the government has preserved 94 horns for academic purposes and 29 horns for court cases, and the rest were sent to the furnace in 2021. Rhino horns having medicinal value have been debunked by activists, wildlife conservationists and the government as seen in official comments.

Simply debunking for the mere sake is far from how other communities' utilisation of the horn in traditional medicine. For centuries some communities in Asia used rhino horn in traditional medicine, and there is merit to it and cannot simply deny the scientific reason for using it. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), is claimed to have medicinal value in rhino horn but further scientific consensus on pharmacology is required (But, Yan-Kit, and Lai-Ching, 1991; Cheung et al., 2018; Laburn and Mitchell, 1997; Liu et al., 2011).

### ***Acclamatory on the Government's Action!***

Nevertheless, the government's action was well received by the social media users, burning of horns sent a strong message, as there is no economic value, and it is a right move to stop poaching of Rhino. Further, this would also help the Rhino to live a peaceful life eventually.

*"Well done. A bold step. By burning the horns, we are sending a message - there is no economic value in RHINO horns. Perhaps in the long run this will help these magnificent animals live a peaceful life"* (Youtube, 2021)

Few comments were raised the pertinent issue of how important the Rhino is to the people of Assam and praiseworthy of the way government has done, and questioning of others linking economic valued and auctioning of the horn:

*"Horns are not the symbol of the state, but the entire rhino is. When you auction off the very thing that the animals are being killed for, what message are you sending to the people: that you don't respect the animals whose bloods were few horns are preserved for academic purposes. Rhino horns are not to be auctioned or sold. Or else we will be doing the same thing as poachers. Only a passionate determination is enough to save the one-horned rhinoceros."* (Facebook, 2021)

Social media users also urge the government to carry out a similar act for the elephant's task, as the Elephant poaching is also high in the state. It is prudent upon the incumbent to take drastic action whether to carry out similar events

on other animals as well.

### ***Disapproval of Government's Action***

The government's action has been well received but some of the comments found expressed their anguish. It is expressed that the burning of rhino horn was just to get attention, political mileage, and publicity linking government crusades on drug peddlers in the state.

*“first the govt stopped drug peddlers but now everything is available in market again...in the name of rhino horns, they will burn woods and become famous...Publicity at its Height...Drugs burning, Rhino horn burning, please burn the weapons of the surrendered militants with such publicity so that those cannot be reused by anyone. It is an attempt to fool people they might have made a deal with the rhino horn mafias in exchange of donations to the party's fund. Gifting the horns to museums across India and World will not earn any political mileage so burning in a spectacular way will give the right amount of political mileage. If this kind of activity is stopped then the government will get away from the voting bank of these people.”* (Facebook, 2021)

Questions are also being raised over the authenticity of the horn. Few comments compared Chief Minister Shri Hemanta Sharma with the ministers of other states prophesying that this act will bag him the best Chief Minister in India. It is found in the comment sections where the government was associated with terms such as ‘chor’ (thief), ‘hands on smugglers’, and ‘comedy show’.

*“This government performs much better than standup comedians. RIP logic. Biggest comedy show is coming up on Wednesday. I feel pity for Yogi Ji because he will not be awarded the best CM. What does the Assam govt want to show such a foolish act .why don't they sell these horns and help the poor instead or else put the money in purchasing more security to these rhinos? This is nothing but show off. It is a problem*

*of India, always pretend to be idealistic but they should go for materialistic purposes.” (Facebook, 2021)*

The strict law and better surveillance system is the need of the hour for the protection of Rhino from being killed is what the public urged in the conversations. The event had also made few mockeries of the action and compared it to their perusal situations. It was not only the government the public mostly commented on but also on the poaching and the people who are involved. The public here compares the government with poachers.

*“Those who were arrested in connection with the smuggling of rhino horns, they might be released because govt. is going to erase their witness means govt. also have hands with smugglers” (Facebook, 2021)*

Comment also sarcastically mentioned about the fake horn:

*“The Gun salute, Vedic puja could be integrity show-off in the destruction of evidence to make oneself tension free since a report of 2016 mentioned most horns in the treasury were fake. A committee was then hastily convened without zoological experts.” (Twitter, 2021)*

The allegation of fake horn is not being denied, fake horns were found but the officials handling in verification of horn did not reveal the number. Some news reports say, case was reported in 2016, and five fake rhino horns have been found during the verification process (Nath, 2016).

## Discussion

Social networking sites are one of the important tools for communication in the contemporary world. The common activities that we can identify on these networking sites are the likes, shared, and comments on the posts. Considering the present study of burning of rhino's horn in Assam, netizens from across the state and others have expressed their concern over the sensitive issues. The reactions recorded in the post of all the three platforms constitute the main analysis of the study. In hindsight, users of the social media platform might be



motivated because of the “need to belong” (Baumeister and Leary, 1995) and the “need for self-presentation” (Nadkarni and Hofmann, 2012). Hence, in the case of rhino’s horn burning, belonging is expressed in an emotional connection with the animal. Whereas collectivism describes how the relationship between members of a society, or a community underline the interdependence of its members. So, the comment shared in the post has the chained reactions on some of the discussion that took place as the collective voice towards the case. The need for self-presentation has been referred to as the idealized-virtual identity hypothesis which relates to the personality characteristics of the users, users portray the real personality and not influence to promote idealized versions of themselves (Back et al., 2010, p. 372). In the context of the act of government and providing alternative means to the issue was discussed by many in the post and hence is the reflection of one’s personality rather than the idealized version of self. The netizen is vigilant about the iconic animal of the state and has raised concern on the lack of Government taking effective measures/initiatives in preservation. Few measures were emphasised on cutting the rhino’s horn to stop the killing by the poachers. If poaching activity continues, and the government fails to take any action, then the days are not far off that the rhino population will distinctly reduce. In the context, burning of stockpiled rhino horn has generated varied opinions ranging from economic value to no value, for and against the government action, religion chanting, medical research, to art and crafts. Religious chanting associated with the burning of horns has been articulate on both sides, some have appreciated it while others condemned it. Least on the contradictory statement made on ‘no economic values on the rhino horn.’ Proper utilisation of horn was most discussed in the comment sections which can be made into a beautiful art and crafts, used for scientific development and medical research rather than burning into ashes. Netizens were disappointed in the Government's action and found dismay and betrayal. It is expressed that the burning of rhino’s horn stockpile is just to have political mileage and publicity and nothing to do with busting the myths ‘no value in the illegal market’ on the rhino horn. The comment showcases public frustrations by not

fulfilling the government's promises of employment in the state. The crucial issue such as this has clearly taken into a criticism on being able to provide for the daily necessities of a person such as drinking tea or rearing pig or establishing an NGO with the money generated from the confiscated rhino horns. There is an apprehension on the image of the state if horns are sold in the international market. Nevertheless, selling rhino's horns can recover the amount, and the government uses those amounts in installing a better surveillance system to monitor the poaching activity. Utilisation of technology will be immensely beneficial in safeguarding the rhino of Assam. The digital communities around the globe are functioning for different causes. Knowledge and technical skills have benefited where the natural conservation sector must learn to remain effective in bringing changes in the conservation.

### **Conclusion**

In the last couple of years, social media platforms are gaining its popularity, main reason been not only because of its ability to reach out to the mass but provision of interactive features to raise one's opinion. Hence, social media as a popular medium has manifested even in human nature interaction platforms. The burning of stockpile 2479 of single-horn Rhino of Assam have been shared in different social media platforms which generate mixed responses who are strongly associated with the place. Hence, the responses are the consequence of emotional attachment with this iconic species. Some have expressed the good faith of the government's action, as it is perceived in a good ridden manner, while others have compared it as illogical, and anguish over the burning of horn rather than using them for a productive purpose. In comparison to the kind of expression, and comments made on different social media platforms, the study found that Youtube is inclined towards the government's action while the Facebook and the Twitter post were sceptical of the event. Overall, the results of the study can be used to enhance strategies for the conservation of rhino in Assam. Based on the gravity and the assertiveness of the comments of the netizens, pressure can seek the decision makers for adopting or allocating necessary steps for the conservation of the rhino. The

comments of the post in all the three platforms, should be able to develop activities and initiatives so that both the government and NGOs work hand in hand to develop policy documents. Conservation is not an easy task; it is a relentless fight against the smugglers and the poachers though laws and policies are promulgated by the government of India but still not active in action. Like the digital community, conservationists can employ the very forum to propagate their campaign and be an active observer on the conservation issues. Nevertheless, this study is based on one single post of three social media platforms focusing only on the burning of rhino in Assam, India. This paper was not compared to similar cases in other countries. The comparison of comments from different countries could broaden the understanding and emotional attachment to the animal. In addition, few comments from the Facebook post were deleted, and selected which is marked as "most relevant", so some replies might have been filtered out. The relevance of the removed post is not known and the reason for taking this decision by the host of the post is not clearly defined. This study is undertaken online whereas users are not in physical contact. Hence, similar studies can be conducted in offline mode to understand motivation or intensity of the users, personality traits of an individual and group.

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