

CURZONS, MIRI AND KAZIRANGA

Ramani Kanta Deka

While tracing the history of Kaziranga National Park, one must name a few luminaries who contributed immensely to its formation. They are Lord & Lady Curzon, Chief Commissioner B. Fuller & Mahi Chandra Miri etc. In January 1899, the honourable George Nathaniel Curzon assumed the charge of Governor General of India. When he left England he was in his fortieth year and had served in Lord Salisbury's government as under secretary both for India and foreign affairs. Prior to his appointment as Viceroy, he visited India four times and penned three marvelous books concerning Asian affairs. He was a distinguished administrator with extraordinary talent, competency and ability to do hard work. In this context celebrated journalist Durga Das's comment in his famous book FROM CURZON TO NEHRU may rightly be quoted – "Both Nehru and Curzon were patrician intellectuals endowed with an abundance of gifts – possessing great personal charm, brilliance of mind, the capacity for fireless work and above all, the eternal boyishness." It is said that before Curzon, no Viceroy or ex-civil servant had ever taken up his office with so full and extensive knowledge regarding the problems to be faced in India. Hence Lord Curzon's tenure as Viceroy of India was destined to stand out with special prominence and elegance.

Lord Curzon introduced a lot of reforms in university education and promoted technical education in India with a courageous vision. His concept of Indian railway development on commercial lines was a very enlightened one. He was aware of the devastation caused



in India by the worst famines. He was of the opinion that if one could use just two percent of the colossal waste of river waters flowing idly into the sea, one could hope to sustain millions of lives in a country where rain does not always fall where it is more needed.

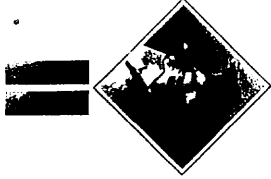
Lord Curzon had great appreciation for India's glorious past and his outstanding achievement was the organization of the All India Archaeological Department for preservation of ancient monuments and priceless heirlooms. Wherever he went, he insisted on visiting the antiquities, whether they were the temples of Madurai, the caves of Ajanta or the Taj at Agra. Lord Curzon founded the Imperial Library in Calcutta, which was intended to be the British

Museum Library of the East. Lord Curzon initiated the move to secure the mountain kingdom Nepal's permission for scaling Mount Everest.

Lord Curzon's wife Mary Victoria Leiter Curzon (1870-1906) was daughter of a Chicago businessman Levi Leiter who made his fortune in dry goods and real estate. As often happened in the 19th Century, the American heiress married a British nobleman. She was extremely beautiful. Years later Lord Curzon arrived in Bombay in SS Arabia on December 30th, 1898 with his beautiful American wife and two baby daughters.

Lord Curzon came to Assam in December 1900, accompanied by Lady Curzon, by a special steamer. He was received at Northbrook gate with pomp and grandeur by Sri John Stedman Henry Cotton the Chief Commissioner of Assam and other dignitaries including Manik Chandra Baruah, one of the most eminent leaders of Assam. There was great sensation at Guwahati on account of Curzon's visit. Guwahati, a hamlet at that time, was decorated for the occasion. Mention may be made that a public ovation was offered to him. Rai Bahadur B.A. Jagannath Baruah read the welcome address.

Sir Henry Cotton, who was a liberal minded man and who loved Assam, complained before Lord Curzon that the Government of India treated Assam as Cinderella. Lord Curzon, in his later days, when he wrote his autobiography published in 1916, enquired whether Assam was still a Cinderella.



As per Padma Nath Gohain Baruah's history of Assam published in 1902, Curzon and his entourage visited Tezpur, Dibrugarh, Margherita, Ledo too besides Guwahati (Gauhati) and thus penetrated deep into the then upper Assam.

Lord Curzon resigned in August 1905 due to his disagreement regarding the military administration in India.

The epoch making event of Kaziranga forest was the visit of Lady Curzon, who was deeply committed to the cause of the preservation of rare wild animals. Her mission at Kaziranga was to see the rare Asian rhino. But alas! She could see only the hoof marks of a rhino. But she persuaded the government for its conservation, the fruition of which was seen in 1905 when Kaziranga was declared as proposed Reserve Forest, at the instance of Sri B. Fuller, the Chief Commissioner of Assam. This set the ball rolling for the conservation of rhinos and rest is history.

In the context I must mention the name of the late Mahi Chandra Miri whose presence in the Kaziranga Game Sanctuary of yester years was fortuitous so to speak, as the first Indian Officer. He was born in 1903 at village Alimur, situated at Dhakuakhana sub division. He was born and brought up in the midst of scenic beauty of Nature replete with flora and fauna. Such forces of Nature shaped his young mind. He possessed a robust figure and mind. He

was a brilliant student and passed his matriculation in 1923 from Sibsagar Govt. H.E. School and graduated from Cotton College with honours in Physics in 1929. In Cotton College he showed his skill in sport and Professor PC Roy a sportsman par excellence was very fond of him. He was not only academically brilliant but also an expert in shooting, fishing, elephant riding, and snake catching.

Soon after his graduation, he got the coveted post of Extra Assistant Conservator of Forest of Assam along with late Madhab Bhattacharjee. In 1928-29, both the officers were sent to Rangoon for training. In the mid 30s, Mahi Chandra Miri was sent to Bagori of Kaziranga Game Sanctuary to look after the long neglected sanctuary. His posting there was a historic one and since then, the sanctuary got a new lease of life. He took up the difficult task of surveying and organizing the Kaziranga Game Sanctuary. EP Gee, author of Wild life of India, hailed him as the man who put Kaziranga on the world map. It is a fact that Mahi Chandra Miri moved heaven and earth to make the Asiatic Rhinoceros known throughout the world. By virtue of his constant vigil and hard labour, he put a check on the illegal activities of poachers who roamed freely in the inaccessible jungles of Kaziranga. He used to get up at dawn and then kept vigil on the sanctuary to check poaching on elephant back. He used to sit on the top of a hill in the adjacent Karbi Anglong district and as soon as he saw poachers, he rushed on elephant back to catch them at the risk of his life. That is why the area has been named after him by the forest department of Assam. A watchtower has also been built there. In 1972 when this writer served as Revenue Officer at Phuloni Circle of Karbi Anglong district, this hill was formally handed over to the DFO of Kaziranga Wild life Sanctuary. Mahi Chandra Miri was a man of honour. I was told by Late Smt. Indira Miri, the remarkable wife of Mahi Chandra Miri, that

while he served at Bagori range, once his English DFO misbehaved with him undeservedly. This hurt Miri so much that he at once wrote his resignation letter and gave it to the DFO. The latter realized his fault and apologized to him.

But alas! Mahi Chandra Miri caught black water fever and succumbed to his death, leaving behind his young wife and children on July 29, 1939. Thus, ended the life of a young and brilliant Assamese forest officer. His untimely demise was undoubtedly a great loss to Assam.



Photo courtesy : Utpal Miri

It is heartening to learn that the forest department of Assam is going to observe the Kaziranga Centenary in the month of February 2005. It is also laudable that the department is going to invite a member of Lord Curzon's family as a mark of respect to Lady Curzon who set the ball of preservation rolling around 1905. Sri Pradyut Bordoloi, Minister of Forest, Assam has already left his mark in improving the forest wealth of Assam. We wish the coming centenary all success.

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