

Rhinoceros—A historical treatment

AJIT BANERJEE

Deputy Conservator of Forests

RHINOCEROS belongs to the natural order Perissodactyla or Odd-toed Ungulates. This genus has three toes on each fore-foot and three on the hind. The dentition is characterised by molar and premolar in one unbroken series. The appearance hardly requires any description.

The species now available in India is the great one-horned rhinoceros viz., *Rhinoceros unicornis* L. This species is distributed in Nepal in the country east of the river Gandak, in Bhutan Duars, in West Bengal Duars and in isolated places in Assam plains. The number of Rhinoceros in West Bengal has been calculated at only 80 by a census recently taken in Jaldapara Wild Life Sanctuary and in the Gorumara Wild Life Sanctuary, the two places where rhinoceros exists in West Bengal. Mr. E. P. Gee has calculated that there are about 185 of the species in Nepal and 375 in Assam¹ to make the total of about 650 in the whole of India sub-continent.

The distribution of rhinoceros, however, was much more widespread and the number was colossal even in the historical period as we will see later. Further, during that period, there is proof that there were more than one species of rhinoceros inhabiting India. In the geological period, there were more than two species of rhinoceros recorded from Indian formations.

Even though the genus Rhinoceros to-day is restricted to the old world, from the fossil studies, it is seen that the distribution of these animals was wide-spread and their number abundant in Europe throughout the Pleistocene and early post-pleistocene times. "Still earlier they were

even more widespread for, from the Pliocene onward they roamed throughout Europe, Asia and North America"². The oldest of these, however, has been recorded from the Eocene beds of America.

According to the latest view, a mammal similar to *Homogalax* or *Eohippus* was probably the ancestor of the rhinoceros, the tapirs and the horses, all of which belong to the same natural order viz., Perissodactyla. The oldest true rhinoceros found in India is *Aceratherium* which had 4 toes in the front feet and 3 on the hind, the little fingers small but functional. In the earlier forms of these species there were no horns. Another species found along with *Aceratherium*, is, *Gaioindatherium* in the Chinji stage of the lower Siwaliks of Jammu and Patwar areas. "*Gaioindatherium* are supposed to have migrated into India from America"³. Evolution appears to have proceeded along several lines from this point although the records are as yet too scanty to allow connections to be made with either of the modern descendants of India. "The great one-horned Rhino (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) and its relative the smaller one-horned or two horn Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*) have an obscure genealogical history"⁴. It is, however, seen that Siwalik Rhinoceroses viz., *Rhinoceros sivalensis* and *Rhinoceros palaeindicus*, which are supposed to be the ancient representatives of the present forms appear suddenly in the Bakh Pathan and Pinjor stage of the middle and upper Siwalik. The Narmada alluvial areas also yielded fossils of Rhinoceros in a bed corresponding to the upper half of the Upper Siwaliks. In the cave deposits of Karnul district of Andhra a species viz., *Rhinoceros karnulensis* have been found and the age of the deposits is supposed to be Pleistocene. Consequently, it may be said that the ancestor of Rhinoceros which evolved in America migrated to India in the Oligocene

¹ E. P. Gee, The Wild Life of India, P. 157, London, 1961.

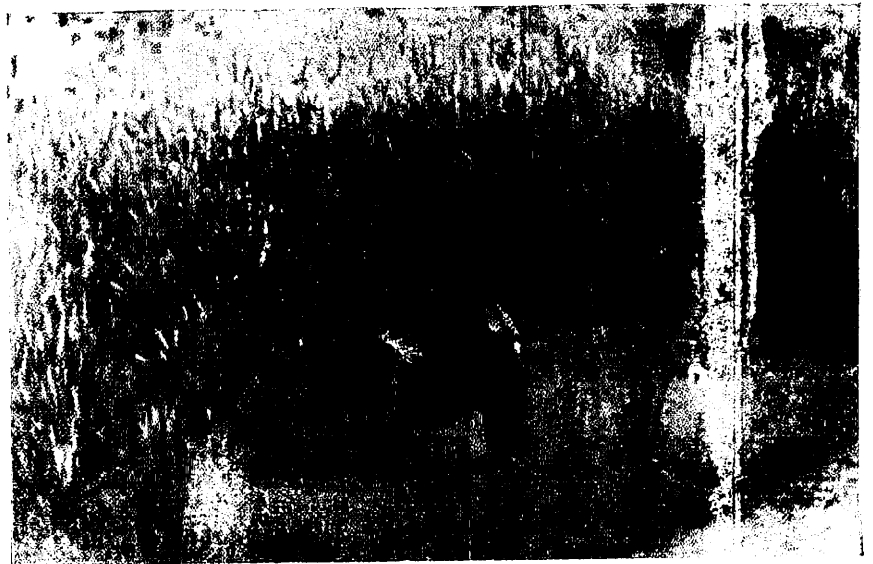
² P. E. Raymond, Prehistoric Life, Page 256, 1950.

³ Geology of India and Burma, M. S. Krishnan, Page 546.

⁴ S. H. Puri, The Book of Indian Animals, Page 191, Bombay.



PLATES 52 & 53 *Rhinoceros Unicornis* in Jaldapara Wild Life Sanctuary.



Miocene period. Further the different species that existed in India in the Pliocene and Pleistocene period included the species akin to the one existing to-day.

In the historical period, the Rhinoceros distribution was very extensive in the Mohen-zodaro-Harappa age. The presence of Rhinoceros seals with extremely life like representations indicate their presence in the Mohen-zodaro-Harappa areas about four to five thousand years ago. Babar in his Memoir has often mentioned the presence of rhinoceros in different parts of Northern India. "There are number of them (Rhino) in the jungles of Pershawar and Hashnajar (i.e. Peshwar and Hashnajar) as well as between the rivers Srad and Behreh in the jungles. In the Hindusthan too they abound in the bank of Saru (Gogra: Leyden)."⁵ Babar also mentions that when he visited Chunar on March 24th of A.H. 935 (A.D. 1528) and was proceeding to Benares, he halted at an intermediate station. He notes in his diary "at this station a man said that in an island close to the edge of Camp he had seen Lion and Rhino etc. etc."⁶. Abul Fazl mentions rhinoceros in the Sambal Sarkar of Delhi Subah in Akbar's reign.⁷ William Finch during his journey in 1608-11 to different parts of India describes that Ayodhya was a great centre for sale of products made from Rhinoceros horns. "Here is great trade, and such abun-

dance of Indian asse-horne (Rhinoceros) that they make here of bucklers and diverse sorts of drinking cups".

Coming to Bengal we find that distribution of rhinoceros was not limited to the duars region only, even about 60 years back. Hunter reports that in 1876 big games in Malda district included rhinoceros, though very rare. Apparently they were becoming extinct by that time. The disappearance of this species from Malda was perhaps due to dis-forestation. Another species, supposed to be *Rhinoceros sondaicus*, was also found distributed in the Sundarbans forests of lower Bengal, as also in Bengal duars. Imperial Gazetteer of India while describing the fauna of Sundarbans in 1909 states "the wild animals include tigers which cause much destruction, rhino (now nearly extinct), buffalo.....etc."

The gradual shrinkage of rhinoceros zone in India is really unfortunate and indirectly point to the gross negligence to this aspect of conservation of wild life throughout the different ages. In Bengal itself the shrinkage is pronounced and the area of their distribution has been restricted to even less than perhaps one-eighth from what it was about 150 years back. The extinction of the species *Rhinoceros sondaicus* from Bengal and for that matter perhaps from India since nobody can really say to-day if a single member of that species still survives, is a matter of grave import. However, in the last decade or so, at least in West Bengal the number of rhinoceros is gradually on the increase in the few Sanctuaries of Jalpaiguri duars where they have been preserved and it is hoped that the number at present eighty will attain a century by 1975.

⁵ John Leyden—Memoirs of Zahir-Ed-Din Mohammed Babar—Page 210—Oxford, 1921.

⁶ *Ibid*—Page 384.

⁷ Col. H. S. Jarrett: Sir J. N. Sarkar: Ain-E-Akbari: page 285 Vol. II, Calcutta, 1919.

⁸ William Foster, Early travels in India, 1583-1610. Page 176, Oxford, 1921.

WEST BENGAL FORESTS



सत्यमेव जयते

FOREST DIRECTORATE
GOVERNMENT OF WEST BENGAL
CENTENARY COMMEMORATION VOLUME

1964