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The People's Paper

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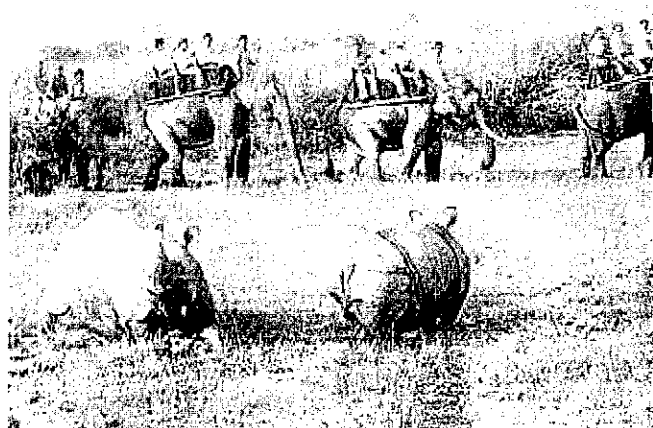
FOCUS NORTHEAST

Nitin A. Gokhale

The birth of Kaziranga

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It all began with a persuasive local wildlife enthusiast Bapiram Hazarika, more popularly known as Nigona shikari. Had it not been for his courage of conviction, Kaziranga National Park, famous for its large concentration of the one-horned rhino may not have come into existence at all. Although Lady Mary Leiter Curzon is often credited with having told her husband, Lord George Curzon, the then Viceroy of British India to take urgent steps to conserve the rhino, it was essentially Nigona shikari who actually convinced Lady Curzon about the existence of the great one-horned Indian rhino in the forest which we today know as Kaziranga National Park.



Assam's pride: Kaziranga National Park

Kaziranga National Park, which completes 100 years of its existence in February 2005, is today regarded as one of the most stunning conservation success stories anywhere in the world. Its USP is the one-horned rhino, now numbering over 1700 but the park also has a wider variety of flora and fauna not seen together elsewhere on this planet. The World Heritage Site tag that it has earned is therefore well-deserved but the origins of the Park are a story by itself.

The story dates back to the first decade of the 1900s when tea gardens were springing up all over Assam. One such garden—Naharjan—was located close to the present-day Kaziranga National Park. This garden was managed by a gentleman called Mr. Forbes who was perhaps distantly related to Lady and Lord Curzon and was an honorary magistrate of the area that was then called Nam-Doyang.

In the January of 1905, Lady Curzon, during her trip to Assam was particularly interested in visiting Naharjan tea estate since she had heard from Forbes that it was possible to see a wide variety of wildlife that existed in abundance in that area. One fine morning, Forbes arranged for three elephants for Lady Curzon and her entourage to go around the area. He also called for Nigona shikari to accompany the distinguished visitor.

Forbes had several reasons to call Nigona shikari as a guide. A self-taught, wizened naturalist, who was not necessarily a shikari but was called so because he knew the jungles inside out, Nigona, a resident of Bosagaon was also a very good mahout. As the party set out for the wild from Mr. Forbes' bungalow, Nigona took charge as the mahout of the elephant that was carrying the lady VVIP. Nigona obviously did not know English but that apparently was not a constraint as he set about explaining the finer points of the jungle and the wildlife to Lady Curzon as Mr. Forbes acted as the interpreter.

As they went deeper into the forest, Nigona spotted a rhino at a distance and excitedly pointed it out to Lady Curzon. She however did not believe him and insisted that it was a wild buffalo. "No, it is a rhino," countered

Nigona. Forbes, who had full confidence in Nigona's knowledge of wildlife, ordered the elephants to be taken closer to the animal. But by the time the party arrived at the spot, the animal had already disappeared into the thicket. Not being able to see anything, Lady Curzon refused to believe Nigona's contention that it was a rhino.

Nigona shikari would however not be put down so easily. He brought the elephants to a halt, got down and inspected the undergrowth as Lady Curzon and Mr. Forbes watched fascinated. Minutes later, Nigona beckoned the visitors to take a look at something. As they descended from the makeshift howdah, Nigona pointed out a series of fresh pugmarks which distinctly had three toes on each foot. He then showed her and Forbes the feet of the elephant which clearly have four toes. Convinced that she had indeed seen the rare sight of a rhino in the wild, Lady Curzon then bombarded Nigona with many queries about rhinos and their habitat. This was Nigona's chance to display his knowledge about the rhinos and concern about their indiscriminate killings, mostly by white hunters. "How can we save this wonderful animal?" asked the Vicereine.

Nigona had a simple solution. "Stop the *sahibs* from killing them," he told Lady Curzon, who on her return to Calcutta, pressed her all-powerful husband to issue orders that would prohibit the hunting of rhinos in Assam. It however took another six months for the government to issue a notification declaring an area of 57,273.60 acres of forests close to Naharjan as the Kaziranga Proposed Reserve Forest.

One hundred years later, Kaziranga has become synonymous with Assam and the one-horned rhino the most recognisable symbol of the state. The charging one-horned rhino has in fact become the official logo for many companies and corporations. For instance, it is seen not only on the buses of the Assam State Transport Corporation, but is also the official mascot of the Assam Oil Company (later renamed as Assam Oil Division, a fully-owned subsidiary of petroleum giant Indian Oil Corporation). More interestingly, it is even visible as the crest on a fighter squadron of the Indian Air Force, based at Tezpur, not very far from Kaziranga.

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