

Riding the Rhino: Conservation, Conflicts, and Militarisation of Kaziranga National Park in Assam

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Abstract: Since 2004, media and public opinion in Assam (India) have focused on increasing instances of poaching of rhinoceros for their horns and presence of Bengali-speaking Muslim peasants, especially in and around the iconic Kaziranga National Park. From hastily made digital films, to anti-poaching motifs at Durga Puja pandals, the plight of the rhinoceros has occupied an important position in an acrimonious political discourse on Assamese culture. The innocence and dignity attributed to the animal stands in marked contrast to the lack of discussion on the large numbers of young men who have been killed in anti-poaching campaigns by the state. This article looks at the interstices of class, culture and commerce in an attempt to understand the popular deification of the rhinoceros and implications of the developmental discourse that seeks to put people and rhino in their “rightful” place.

Keywords: development, militarisation, Assam, rhino poaching

Casting the Problem

The one-horned Indian rhinoceros has been enjoying a renaissance in the Indian state of Assam since the last decade. Its image has adorned the buses of the Assam State Transport Corporation (ASTC) since 1970. More recently, it has appeared in the form of Tikhor, the playful mascot of the 12th South Asian Games that were held in Guwahati and Shillong from 5 to 16 February 2016. Travellers who drive into petrol stations are also likely to see the imprint of a red rhino emblem of Assam Oil pasted on the pumps, and on bags of tea. However, all is not well with the celebratory story of the animal. Since 2010, local print and electronic media have reported several instances of rhino poaching, especially around the iconic Kaziranga National Park (KNP), where the animals are hunted down for their horns. Poaching is a high-stakes, lucrative affair that involves a motley cast of characters such as politicians, government officials, smugglers, insurgents, petty criminals and ordinary villagers. In this nebulous world, places like KNP and its picturesque neighbourhood, are allegedly linked to other locations in India, Myanmar and eventually to China. As a response, at least 24 young men were killed in Assam (in different parks, but mainly within KNP) in 2015 alone. The forest department, as well as the local media, say that these killings were the result of encounters between forest guards and poachers.

This charged media imagery of the embattled and much loved rhino being killed and the figure of the poacher has resulted in the emergence of yet another set of

responses from the urban, middle class people of the state. In 2014, the Beltola area of Guwahati city had an interesting motif for its Durga Puja display, an important Hindu festival celebrated around September/October every year that had on display the goddess smiting an evil poacher for killing a rhinoceros. The rhino's plight even moved a local independent filmmaker—Rajkumar—to make his own low-budget film on rhino poaching, where he was both saviour and terminator. In his film, he (the protagonist) teamed up with a tough forest officer and went in search of poachers.¹ Between the Durga Puja festivities and the slapstick film on YouTube, it would appear that the rhinoceros has become a dense symbol for different parties in a society emerging from more than three decades of counter-insurgency against separatist rebel groups. Concern for the animal, much of it advertised via electronic and print media, has welded together a particular idea of conservation, tourism and regional sentiments that disregard the impoverishment of the agriculturalists living along the fringes of the park.

These issues have an immediate political bearing as well. The current Prime Minister of India singled out the predicament of the animal during the run up to the parliamentary elections in 2014. He accused the Indian National Congress-led government in Assam of colluding with undocumented immigrants from Bangladesh and conspiring to rid Assam of rhinos, so that there could be more space for settlers to come and cultivate in the marshes of KNP (*Business Standard* 2014). It is fairly imaginative to draw connections between migration and murder in Assam, but bringing in the plight of the rhino into the incendiary mix is a new phenomenon. Middle class persons who drive past KNP are prone to commenting about the presence of cultivators with visible markers—skullcaps, beards and chequered wraparounds—who live along the fringes of the park. However, the Prime Minister's electoral pronouncement on the issue was perhaps the first time that there was an official connection drawn between disparate political concerns in the public domain.² For people who were about to vote for new representatives in the state's legislative assembly, references to settlers and outsiders evoked memories of violence that had become a regular feature of political mobilisation in the state since the 1980s.

Assam's contemporary politics has been defined by violence since the 1980s. The conflicts coincide with contemporary concerns for conservation that had emerged following a period when insurgents took refuge in Manas National Park, even though conserving areas for wildlife go back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when it was introduced (by the colonial administration) amid protests from local peasants. In the last decade, instances of armed encounters between insurgents and security personnel had reduced considerably and this in turn had resulted in the expansion of tourism, particularly around the main national parks in the state. Since then, I argue that the convergence of interest in the rhino marks both continuity and a shift in political discourse in Assam. In 1991, the government of India began counter-insurgency operations that were codenamed Operation Rhino and had resulted in large-scale human rights violations. It was perhaps the first time that the animal was invoked in military operations against insurgents, as well as the civilian population. The terrain of counter-insurgency has continued from an earlier generation between 1990 and 2009, where government's impunity

for staged encounters between the military/police and armed insurgents has allowed for similar incidents between forest guards and alleged poachers, while invoking the animal again. There has also been a shift in the manner in which the media and the urban middle classes have weighed in on the government's anti-poaching drive, thereby acceding to evictions of farmers from certain villages near KNP. In explicating the themes of this essay, I draw from a growing interest in political ecology that sutures connections between conservation, violence and conflict over contested resources that include wildlife parks and sanctuaries, especially where local, state-led conservation efforts rely on eviction of marginalised farmers while promoting tourism as a form of capital accumulation (Brockington and Wilkie 2015; Craven 2016; Duffy 2016; Lunstrum 2014; Massé and Lunstrum 2016; Peluso and Watts 2001).

To do so, I draw an outline of the growing interest in locating criminal activity around KNP by looking at the lives and livelihoods of those who live around the fringes of the park. Thereafter, I locate the historical development of interest in conservation (in Assam), to a period when colonial institutions and discourses created a particular hierarchy of belonging for animals and humans. Subsequently, I show how this discourse has been carried over to the present day, especially in the manner in which anti-poaching, pro-conservation individuals and institutions have begun to find common ground with an alarmist anti-immigration political discourse in the state.

Crime and Criminals in the Park

In May 2015, an activist who lived in a small town near the park addressed a meeting of concerned citizens in Guwahati, where I teach and began to explain the increasing cases of extra-judicial executions in and around his village. In the pictures, armed police and paramilitary personnel stood around bodies of emaciated young men, whose faces had been blown off. Their frail hands were either folded neatly along their chests, or behind them (that almost suggested that they were bound). In the past, such killings would have resulted in large-scale protests from civil society organisations. The last three decades of counter-insurgency in Assam had thrown up similar bodies—some claimed, others not—but they became part of a documented resistance to extra-judicial executions and excesses committed by the state (Talukdar et al. 2009). Barely a few years since the infamous secret killings (1996–2001), these horrific pictures did not elicit any public anger, save the visible anguish of the hunched young man who showed them to the assembled group of people. I joined a team of journalists and human rights activists that he put together to visit the park. Over the next year, I returned—sometimes on my own and sometimes with other researchers and journalists—for shorter periods of time to understand how KNP had become a site for violent contestations.

Horen Doley was a 22-year-old student of Numaligarh College (not very far from KNP). A young man given to woodcarving, he had gone missing from his uncle's village where he had chosen to spend his summer vacation in June 2014. His uncle—a farmer—lived in a village close to KNP. The river Brahmaputra flowed

barely a kilometre from the farmer's house and one could see the embankments from the open front of his raised house. The core area of the park lay to the east, while the paddy fields and the Dhansiri River lay about four kilometres to the west. About four or five kilometres to the south of the homestead was the town of Golaghat and the hills of Karbi Anglong district. A narrow, pitched road veered off the arterial highway—National Highway 37—to lead visitors away from the bustling traffic and enterprise of Bokakhat town and into the farmer's village. Barely four kilometres towards the village, the tarred road constricted itself into an even narrower mud track, where four wheelers would have to stop.

On the night he went missing, Horen's aunt had cooked dinner for him. He had annoyed her by slipping away, to smoke and party with some of his friends from the village. Initially, the family members were not worried because most young men often stayed out late with friends, especially since army operations against insurgents had decreased in the area since the early 2000s. He had kept calling his aunt and uncle from his mobile phone and informed them that he and his friends would be out late. "He was a good, handsome boy, our Horen and he loved the animals in the park", his uncle said to us as he displayed the carvings of rhinos and birds that the young man had done earlier to earn some extra money. In fact, the ranger of KNP, impressed with the youth's talents, had made vague promises of a job to Horen. The ranger had had no qualms receiving gifts of curd and carved animals from the young man, who thought that these efforts would help him get a job working for the forest department. Horen never came back home that night. Instead, a couple of days later his uncle and a few other villagers were told that the body of a poacher had been sent to the morgue in Golaghat town (more than 50 kilometres away). Fearing the worst, the uncle had accompanied Horen's father to Golaghat, where they reclaimed Horen's decaying, and maggot-filled body. His death was reminiscent of the manner in which security forces would claim to have killed insurgents throughout the 1990s. The circumstances of such deaths during counter-insurgency operations were dubious and elicited protests from human rights groups, as well as the courts of law (MASS 2000). Even in the 1990s, it was almost impossible to prove that those killed were insurgents, as it was to show evidence that Horen was involved with rhino poachers.

Such murders were not uncommon in KNP. Local villagers, police personnel, lawyers and forest officials spoke about the enormity of the problem in a disturbing media report that appeared on 31 January in the *Hindustan Times* (2016a). According to the report, as many as 24 persons (allegedly poachers) were killed in and around the core area of KNP in 2014 alone. Most families, including Horen's, who spoke to the journalists, were sure that the forest department had had something to do with the killings. They questioned the timing and reliability of the First Information Reports (FIR) that the forest department filed with the police after an alleged encounter between them and poachers. The report took special care to mention the discomfort local police personnel expressed when handing over dead bodies of alleged poachers to the families, many of whom were subsistence farmers who eked out a living from their paddy fields, averaging about three hectares per person, on the fringes of the park. One is left with a foreboding sense of poverty and loss that permeates the different

characters in the story: the alleged poachers and their families, the ill-equipped guards of the forest department as well as the police, seemed trapped in a vicious cycle of need and greed.

Right to Information (RTI) appeals by activists in the KNP area show that between 2010 and 2015, there were as many as 636 persons who were arrested under the Wildlife Protection Act (WPA) of 1972.³ Of these, 227 cases were pending under Nagaon jail, 233 cases under Tezpur jail and the remaining 176 were pending in Golaghat jail. These statistics are important not because they reveal a sharp rise or fall, but because they represent an increasing awareness among the forest officials that cases need to be recorded and registered against those accused of poaching and trading in wildlife. In most cases, the law would take its own time and leave both parties—the accused and the accusers—in limbo. In such instances, those accused of such crimes were likely to be at a much more disadvantageous position than those who had accused them. Not only were they likely to enter into the litigious world of courts, judges and the police, but they would also have to contend with an increasingly hostile media and public opinion emanating from newsrooms and living rooms in urban Assam. For many young men like Horen, even a minor brush with the law rendered them more vulnerable to threats and in extreme cases, executions. Moreover, with little or no access to lawyers and legal experts, such men seemed destined to a precarious life in the labyrinth of law. Even then, if one were to take media reports and interventionists seriously, then it does seem as though petty crime—exemplified in the number of cases filed under the WPA—has gained some traction in the areas around KNP.

In an effort to keep the peace and to reiterate the importance of the Eco-Development Committees (EDC) that were set up by the forest department, the village elders had in the past rounded up the unemployed youth of the area—especially those who were “marginally involved in hunting”—to surrender their homemade arms to the forest department.⁴ I have used quotes to describe the extreme care and caution exercised by the people who spoke to me about this event. “Were they poachers?”, I asked somewhat disingenuously, using the Assamese word “Surang Sikari” for poachers. The villagers were immediately defensive and perhaps rightly so. “No, they would just hunt for game sometimes” (*Nai, enei maje-xomoi-e sikar korisil*), they kept insisting several times, to ensure that I was able to see the difference between a just hunt for food and an unjust enterprise for rhino horns. In 2010, the young men from Horen’s village were asked to surrender in order to have the cases (that were pending) against them dropped by the courts. The elders of the EDC had supposedly spoken with the forest department to ensure a win–win situation for all concerned. The young men would not have to pursue a long and expensive litigation, while the forest department would have the kind of partnership with local youth that was envisaged in the Joint Forest Management (JFM) and EDC mandates. However, the elders of the village were disappointed by the lack of initiative shown by the forest department, who neither tried to employ the young men in their ranks, nor really drop the cases against them. While some cases might have been dropped, many of the young men were picked up for questioning every time an animal was killed. As a result, most of the young men who had taken part in the 2010 “surrender ceremony”

had left the area in search of work.⁵ It was as though the surrender itself was a precursor for the eventual unmooring of their lives: with no future in agriculture, without the prospects of jobs and with criminal cases pending against them, these young men went far away from Assam to take up lowly paid jobs in other parts of India.

The relationship between the different authorities and institutions that are meant to protect the rhinoceros (and other wildlife), and the cross-section of individuals and collectives who live along the fringes, are of immense importance to understanding the statistical data on criminal cases filed under the WPA. From the moment it entered the surroundings of KNP, the highway reflected the class, gender and ethnic fractures in Assam. Assamese-speaking men owned the various restaurants and resorts that served ethnic food and alcohol, and were built along the highway or within the fringes of the park. The presence of women—in both restaurants and resorts—was fleeting, as they came in to clean living and dining spaces after holidaymakers and travellers had left. Of course, one saw a difference in attitudes among owners of resorts and restaurants. Some of the older proprietors had painstakingly ensured that local villagers found it possible to use the space that their resorts had to offer. For instance, some resorts had built small houses where villagers could come to weave, make baskets and other craft in their free time. This allowed villagers and the guests to engage with one another and exchange information. More importantly, some of the older private resorts served as places where guests could buy local handicraft that the villagers had made. Other, newer resorts were less welcoming of local communities. Their tall walls sequestered the rich guests from the poverty visible just outside.

Horen's uncle's household in a village on the fringes of the park was empty because his aunt and the children had gone fishing. The uncle apologised for their absence, as there was no one to make tea for the three visitors. He showed the visitors the exact spot around his barn where wild elephants had knocked over a heavy wooded beam just a day before. "Elephants are a menace", he said almost as though the pachyderm were an errant family member. "They are loud and clumsy when they want to be destructive", he added pointing towards the patches of paddy that were trampled upon. The family returned after an hour, caked in mud and happy with their day's work in the various streams and ponds in the area. As they laid the fishes out in the sun to dry, the woman of the house brought out bowls of rice beer and rice cakes for the visitors. She too expressed resignation in the face of problems brought about by elephants. Her demeanour changed drastically when she realised that the conversation was about Horen. She wondered if the boy would still be alive had she insisted that he stay home for dinner. "Look at the replicas of the rhinos he made", she said, as she brought out several bamboo carvings that he had made and reiterated what her husband had said earlier about the boy's love for animals. The conversation stopped for a while as the couple retreated to a private, melancholic realm and it was only when one of the journalists accompanying the group asked about more examples of human–animal conflict that they reluctantly resumed talking about rhinos and elephants. "We coexist, even if they sometimes harm us. We have to forgive (both animals and humans)", she said as she returned into the house for more rice beer.

Sometimes the forest department compensated the farmers if they were able to prove that animals (especially rhino, elephants and wild buffalo) had damaged the standing crop, but it took several months for the money to find its way to the farmer.⁶ Engaging with the forest department on matters relating to compensation was becoming more contentious for local farmers, especially since the department was quick to claim that human farms came in the way of animal (especially elephant) corridors. Local activists would seethe at the irony of having poor farmers pay the price for wildlife conservation, even as the authorities allowed places like the neighbouring Numaligarh Oil Refinery to construct an extravagant golf course along the elephant corridor. In conversations with the under-employed young men, one was able to sense some discordant notes as they spoke about the resorts along the fringes of KNP. They did not want to work there as waiters, nor did they want to have anything to do with the tourists who came to the resorts, they said. However, there were frequent social transactions between some of the older villagers, especially women, and many of the lodges and resorts to warrant a studied response to potential conflicts between the two. Hence, when confronted with ruined paddy fields, even as they deflected accusations about poaching, the villagers and activists around KNP were under no qualms expressing their ire against the big refinery and resentment against some of the more exclusive resorts. Some villagers said coexistence was possible with animals but more difficult with corporations and big business. This process forms a flashpoint between conservation efforts and those eking out a livelihood from parks, since they cause economic displacement for many and outright displacement without compensation for many (Brockington and Igoe 2006).

This did not stop people from aspiring to be part of some enterprise that could lift them from their lot. Most young men expressed their disinterest in continuing with agricultural work as a way of life. For many, the aspirational world beamed into their homes through satellite television was always outside Assam. Horen's cousin, a 20-year-old man with a Korean pop-star-inspired haircut, for instance, had no wish to remain in the village. He had recently applied to join the Indian army and had been among the few to be recruited. He was spending the last few weeks with his friends in the village.

On the day I visited his uncle's home, scores of young men, some who remembered Horen Pegu, waited along the road playing carom or cards. The younger ones watched the games, as the older men stayed glued to their games. Very few of them wanted to participate in the agricultural work that their parents had been engaged in. Instead, they sought employment in the urban sprawl of mainland India, where they had no qualms working as security guards, waiters, chefs, bouncers, fish and meat packers and (for those who went to Southern India) labourers in rubber plantations. In Assam, this is a phenomenon that has led to several lively newspapers and television debates, with people weighing in on different sides. Some, such as the political commentator, Hiren Gohain, who is renowned for his commitment to social justice wondered why young Assamese men were leaving their homes (and agriculture) to work for paltry wages of INR 7000, because this would then lead to either of two possibilities: (1) poorer, migrant peasants taking up the lands on lease for cultivation; or (2) richer capitalists

buying agricultural land and slowly converting (the land) to private estates and resorts (Gohain 2015).⁷ Younger scholars and researchers, such as Ankur Tamuli Phukan, Gaurav Rajkhowa, Bidyut Sagar Boruah and Anshuman Gogoi, felt that Gohain's arguments reflect an "old, left-nationalist ideal" that placed unfair onus on the migrating peasant to answer for the ills of the new rent-seeking, primitive accumulation-oriented economy (Boruah et al. 2016).⁸ Such situations enable the emergence of associative relationships between humans, the places they inhabit and the reality of migration that brings about demographic change. It also resonates in the tensions arising out of the monkey–human conflicts in Uttarakhand, which have become a dense metaphor about migration, development and belonging in the Himalayan region of North India (Govindrajan 2015). The situation in Assam reflects a wider global phenomenon where economic growth has taken place without any new employment opportunities in the manufacturing sector that rural landless are able to turn to (Li 2014).⁹

Migration (at least for young men around KNP) was the manifestation of processes that were both coercive and voluntary. Tourism and wildlife offered an alternate source of livelihood for a few who are willing to remain within the state. KNP, in particular, has become a veritable must-see site for high-profile visitors and budget tourists alike. It has offered local people a chance to earn some money from tourists, especially in the dry winter and spring months. Hence, it would be crucial to understand the historical processes that contributed to creating a wildlife-based view of the world, where animals and humans found themselves placed along a spectrum of desirability for the government.

Parks, Gardens, and Making of the Modern Menagerie

The making of KNP saw two simultaneous processes of resource capture and wealth creation possibilities over the last century. The rhino played a central part in the conservation narrative, though until recently, it did not appear as a significant presence in historical accounts. In researching for this paper, I had visited villages, forest department outposts, resorts and offices of NGOs since May 2015, in order to understand how and when did the rhino and KNP become such an iconic symbol for conservation in Assam. A proprietor of one of KNP's oldest resorts for tourists wondered if Lady Curzon had ever come to the area at all. A much admired person among conservationists, wildlife enthusiasts and travellers the proprietor was a quintessential raconteur who held forth on a wide array of matters ranging from foraging as a sustainable food gathering resource for the poor, to the rice-growing techniques of Muslim peasants of Bengal origins who lived along the fringes of the park. He was not convinced that Lord Curzon's American wife ever made it as far as KNP. "It was cooked up by a canny forester back in the 1980s and has become integral to the park's myth of origin", he said. The Lady Curzon fable, however, has become an integral part of the KNP story that begins with her visit to the area to see rhinoceroses in the wild. Upon failing to see even one, she was said to have pleaded with her husband to ensure that the area be declared a wildlife park where hunting would not be allowed. Today, it is a World Heritage Site and was declared a Tiger Reserve in 2006. Both tributes carry with them a series of obligations that

involve conservation and sequestering of land for animals, on the part of the administration. Adding to this already complex relationship was the embedding of a labour-intensive tea plantation system that was set up in the middle of the 19th century that contributed to the naturalisation of racial hierarchies of labour, race and crucially for this essay, space as well. The growing of tea, as historian Jayeeta Sharma explains, was strategically deployed to neat gardens while the wilderness was meant for conservation and selective appropriation (Sharma 2011).

Historically, other than the apocryphal story about Mary Curzon, there did not seem to be much affection—or even derision—for the rhino in Assam. Her spouse, Lord Curzon, enjoyed shooting animals around the forests and game reserves in the colony during his lifetime. In fact, tigers and wolves were central to the evolution of colonial rules and discourse regarding hunting, avoidance and killing in self-defence of flesh-eating animals in the Indian sub-continent (Rangarajan 2012:95–141). However, there seemed to be little interest and honour in killing rhinos in the wild. Folk tales and historical accounts about the bestiary of the Brahmaputra valley make no mention of the animal. Many animals and birds constitute the colourfully entangled world of animals and humans in Assam and have charmed and frightened young and old people in equal measure. Unlike kites, tigers and sundry spirits, the rhinoceros did enter the stockpile of folk stories that brought together humans and animals. The association between the rhino that is much loved today and human beings seemed to have been one of ambivalence in Assam.

The 19th century expansion of capital to the Brahmaputra valley seriously altered the relationship between the rhino and humans. Historian Arup Saikia writes about the incremental manner in which Assam's rice and jute growing areas were extended in the early part of the 1900s, especially after Viceroy Curzon decided to partition the colonial province of Bengal (Saikia 2014:21–72). The migration of a fairly large peasant population from different parts of deltaic Bengal created considerable unrest among indigenous communities in the area. At stake were substantive issues of radically different land use and land relations that the migrants had introduced to the area. Added to this mix, were the powerful European tea planters who had transformed the foothills and higher, less marshy areas of the valley for tea cultivation. Tea and the introduction of the plantation system would transform agriculture in Assam and lead to an expansion of labour and capital at an unprecedented pace.

The expansion of colonisation and conservation in 20th century Assam was a significant event. Ever since, the transformation of nature had remained a messianic project for colonial and post-colonial governments alike. Writing about the impact of (both) colonialism and nationalism on the ecological landscape of South Asia, Cederlöf and Sivaramakrishnan write (in particular reference to Jawaharlal Nehru's vision of developing post-colonial India): "... portraying romantic visions of landscapes while transforming it profoundly—the colonial and postcolonial states converge in their relationship to nature" (Cederlöf and Sivaramakrishnan 2006:31). Thus, the 19th century transformation of KNP can also be seen in light of a more universal attempt at creating a modern world where spheres of human activity (plantations, farms and mines) could exist in marked separation and

difference from spaces where animals lived in the wild. It mattered little that places like KNP were corralled in areas where neighbouring forests were being cleared for tea plantations in the early 20th century (Saikia 2011:12–13). Under such conditions, Lady Curzon's anxieties about the rhinoceros seem like a curious concern. For a better part of the 19th and early 20th centuries, colonial authorities were systematically reducing animal and subsistence peasant habitats, while allowing for an expansion of extractive industries by large corporate entities. These processes are still at play in contemporary times.

Today, KNP occupies a wide area that falls under three districts—Nagaon, Golaghat and Karbi Anglong—of Assam. The park is under the control of the forest department of Assam, though some of the contiguous areas that fall under the autonomous hill district of Karbi Anglong are governed under special provisions that are granted under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. In addition to this, the upkeep of several highways and smaller roads is entrusted to an entirely different department of the government. As such, much of the financial responsibility for the upkeep of KNP falls squarely on the government, though there is an increasing tendency for external agencies to get involved (as is discussed later in this essay). Over the last few decades, especially after the 1990s, various private organisations and individuals have secured tenures to settle along the fringes of the park and create opportunities of earning a livelihood. The forest department had even controversially leased out land for the quarrying of stones in 2006, leading to protests by environmental groups and individuals (Gogoi 2015). The scales of these enterprises differ greatly, as do the taxes that they pay (to the government) in the upkeep of KNP. This creates a creative and harmonious picture of flora, fauna, human beings and commerce in the park. Birds and animals find their way into billboards and hoardings that advertise wildlife getaways for tourists in the park. The separation of animals, humans and their habitat that began during the late 19th century in Assam would seem to have reversed its course, if one were to go by the associative advertisements along the highway. Beasts and entrepreneurs compete for attention as they invite tourists into a play-world of exciting encounters.

Here too, the rhinoceros is a late entrant into the menagerie. Recent scholarship on the elephant–human relationship around KNP has unearthed some interesting linkages between the pachyderm and its habitat, as well as its difficult connections with humans that should resonate with the story of the rhinoceros as well. Geographer Maan Barua's (2013) work attributes an uncanny cosmopolitanism to the elephant and shows how class and transnational interests come together to create a favourable environment for elephant conservation efforts, which in turn have always had unsympathetic responses by those who have to share space with the animals. For every effort to build smart corridors for animals, there is always the counter-intuitive question about animals' agency and intelligence that comes from various sources, especially those whose livelihoods are vulnerable to animal depredation. Thus, one might actually be drawn to create a heuristically motivated chart of animals and their affective relationship with humans with whom they have to share space with. Elephants, monkeys, deer, certain species of bird and snakes would be considered everyday visitors, for whom humans would have almost

quotidian parables and stories to explain variations in their behaviour and perceived intelligence.

These examples serve to highlight the historical contestations around the idea of a species boundary between humans and animals that are reflected in the present-day context of the conservation and rhino protection narrative in Assam. Picking up a similar thread in their book on the cultural history of the orang-utan, Cribbs et al. (2014) delved deep into the philosophical traditions emerging from the Enlightenment to show how doctrines of human inequality often recruited animals to enable a racial ranking of (other animal) life. The increasing clamour to address the poaching of rhinos coincides with the demands for evictions of Bengali-speaking Muslim peasants from the flood plains that form the perimeter of the park's core area. There is little doubt that the decline of the rhino population in Assam (and in South Asia) is part of a biological reality. Ever since the 16th century, the historical homeland for the rhino has been drastically reduced in a manner that requires social scientists to re-engage with the interconnected world of conservation, recreation and reproduction of occupational life-worlds in the manner in which Maan Barua urges them to.

Tracing the contours of the colonial/modern idea of wilderness and civilisation in Assam, to a contemporary emphasis on animal conservation, one can see the imputation of place to both people and animals. In contemporary times as well, the Assamese peasant was located in the paddy fields and the rhinoceros belonged to the jungle. It is this logic of placing people and animals in a fixed space that allowed for the extension of counter-insurgency to rural Assam over the last two decades (Barbora 2012). Resorts and hotels around KNP attempt to revive a colonial era ambiance by focusing on a singular tourist experience of nature. In reality, the actual landscape around KNP is a deeply contested one, claimed in equal part by state and other non-state actors such as insurgents and poachers. However, as the nature of counter-insurgency changed around the year 2009—following initiation of peace talks between the government and different insurgent groups—the militarisation of the park remained integral to the government's attempts to focus on securing KNP as a tourist site.¹⁰ Having failed to declare the park a tiger reserve, the government and conservation groups concentrated their efforts on rhino, leading to interesting outcomes for conservationists and those arguing for evictions of certain kinds of peasants from the fringes of the park.

A Peculiar Conservationist Conundrum

The rhinoceros looks like a slow lumbering animal, given to glacial movements from one path of grassland to another over the course of a day. Visitors driving through KNP often stop and indulge in a bit of “rhino-spotting” at a small part of the park that is dissected by National Highway 37. Local farmers around the villages where I conducted fieldwork wryly acknowledge the precariousness of their fields and farms, especially when animals decide to cross the highway. Even a recently constructed fence that emitted a mild electric current was not enough to dissuade the animals from taking in some cultivated crop. The farmers I interviewed rarely expressed rancour against the animals. When asked how they protect their crops

from rhinos, they offered a range of activities, such as lighting fires, standing watch at night and verbally abusing the rhino. In conversations with groups of farmers, the rhino seemed like an errant neighbour, rather than a source of wealth that needed to be hunted for its horn. Every discussion ended with well-articulated ideas about the need for farmers and the animals of the park to coexist, as well as a formal declaration disassociating the farmers from acts of poaching and illegal hunting. Yet, for many other actors, especially those who were able to create public opinion—including the media and environmental NGOs—this situation was fraught with problems for the rhino (and other animals). In their articulation of the problem of animal poaching, they rely on the production of a narrative of the poacher-as-terrorist that has become a convenient lens for furthering the militarisation of the parks, as has been done in other parts of the world, notably in Africa (Duffy et al. 2015). The tropes of development, protection of wildlife and conservation become conveniently attached to violent responses by various arms of the state, including those that have a degree of autonomy like the courts and the media.

On 30 September the *Assam Tribune* (2015)—an English language daily published in Guwahati—carried front-page news about poor rates of conviction for those arrested for rhino poaching. Quoting contradictory claims by the minister responsible for the forest department and an environmental NGO worker, the report mentioned that rhino poachers were getting away because of loopholes in legal procedures. This sort of bickering within the various circles of authority in the administration rest on two pivotal issues: (1) the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972; and (2) responsibilities apportioned to various departments and groups for the protection of wildlife. These loopholes are the reason why non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have emerged to complement the state's existing departments that deal with forests, animals and also humans who have claims over both (forests and animals). This creates a lively arena for contestations that seem to work at cross-purposes.

On 8 February 2016 a division bench of the Gauhati High Court, chaired by Justices Manjit Bhuyan and Hrishikesh Roy, issued notices to the chief secretary of the state of Assam for failing to evict persons from the animal corridors of KNP.¹¹ Earlier, on 9 December 2015 the same judges had issued a court order giving the government a month to evict encroachers from certain areas of the park. The petition to act against the government's lackadaisical approach came from private individuals living in Golaghat town and Guwahati city. On its part, there was little that the government could do to address the court's order. In reality, the people who inhabited the areas mentioned in the court order had valid documents to settle there. The court was not the only institution that had taken up cudgels on behalf of conservationists in Assam. The local media—both print and electronic—had continuously aired similar views on the problems faced by small and large species of wildlife in Assam. Newspapers and television channels expressed great concern in the month of May 2015, following police reports of an increase in poaching. They focused on the perils of poaching in wildlife, not just “mega animals” like tigers, elephants and rhinos, but also smaller species, and appreciated the kind of work that was being done by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), India and Wildlife Crime Control Bureau in this regard.¹²

“My work falls in the grey area of conservation”, said Deepak Saha (name changed), who works for a foundation dedicated to the protection of rhinos in different parts of the world. We sat at a busy crossroads near the city of Tezpur, not very far from the fringes of KNP, which was spread across the other side of the Brahmaputra River. He described his work as something that fell halfway between criminal investigation and paralegal aid to the forest department. He spent the best part of the afternoon explaining the details of the illegal trade in rhino horns in Assam and drew on anecdotal incidents from his previous experiences working for WWF in other parts of India. As we conversed, he was careful to draw a distinction between the kind of work he had done for WWF and the semi-clandestine nature of his current responsibilities. Saha saw his efforts as an amalgam of the routine work of spies, policemen and forest wardens to curb the illegal trade and hunting of wildlife.

He admitted that this was a difficult job. The Wildlife Protection Act was enacted in 1972 but it was difficult to enforce in places where traditional communities were used to hunting for game. Moreover, the state had legalised the auctioning of rhino horns until 1974 and entire communities had grown up believing that hunting was part of their culture, Saha claimed. In the course of our discussion, he kept referring to various events where he had apprehended poachers and helped the forest and police departments seize all manner of animal parts that were meant to go to different parts of the world. An unmarried NGO professional, he was very forthcoming about the limits of his ability to empathise with the lives and lot of those who were hunting the rhino for its horn. Rather, he saw them as criminals who were greedy and wanted to make some quick money at the expense of the helpless rhino. He kept referring to a well-known tiger poacher, Sansar Chand, who was caught in Rajasthan (in western India), who had a battery of lawyers and lived a lavish lifestyle. Saha admitted that the poachers in Assam were not likely to be as flashy as Chand (who incidentally died in 2014).¹³ Instead, he invoked the murky world of insurgent groups, particularly in Manipur, corrupt politicians and lawyers, without actually specifying any details about who they were, or offering evidence that there was indeed such a connection. They were all, according to him, gaming the law in their quest for wealth and there was precious little that the government was capable of doing on its own.

In this particular context, the WPA seemed a peripheral concern for everyone involved in the story. The poachers, as Mr Saha reiterated several times over coffee, seemed unconcerned about the Act and often found easy loopholes to avoid prosecution; the forest department did not know how they could use the law to prosecute those who came intending to kill rhinos; the police, army and other armed agencies of the state saw it as a quaint piece of legislation that seemed to distract them from the real business of policing and counter-insurgency. Even so, the Act remained an anchor for INGO functionaries like Mr Saha. He had structured his engagement with government agencies to appear as though he was a consultant entrusted to conducting workshops with police personnel and forest officials. At these workshops, he would train them on how to improve their conviction rates of alleged poachers by including sections of the WPA in their case

diaries. This allowed him access to the forest departments, the police and to some sections of the local communities as well.

Saving the rhino was as viable a commercial enterprise as was poaching, according to Mr Saha. He referred to the several resorts and lodges that had come up over the last decade. All of them catered to a seasonal burst in tourists who saw KNP as an embodiment of wildlife and biodiversity that Assam had to present to the world. Even the tea companies were cashing in on the need for conservation by encouraging high-end tourists to live in palatial planters' bungalows all over upper Assam. There is a sense of irony in this: an industry that might have been responsible for the drastic reduction of forest cover for the rhino was now being called upon to find ways to conserve the habitat for the animal. It is not as if the planters would send out their guards and workers to look for poachers, but they were called upon to address the larger conservation attempts at creating alternative livelihoods for the people dependent on the parks. Hence, some of the bigger companies had created small showrooms that sold ethnic fabric and handicraft along National Highway 37 that cut right through the heart of KNP.

It gave them a sense of being part of an endeavour to police the parks and the people who live along its fringes. It is not clear if this gives bigger tea and oil enterprises special privileges to influence the outcome of conservation activities around KNP. The immediate gatekeepers responsible for conservation and protection were the guards appointed by the forest department, often ill paid and always under pressure from the media and the ministry, especially when news of poaching of animals trickled out from the park. Forest guards are seen patrolling the highway that passes through the park, as well as the paths inside. Dressed in khaki and carrying old rifles, they live in Spartan dwellings inside the park, where everyday work and leisure take on an entirely different meaning from those that their neighbouring villagers are used to. Unlike the predominantly farming communities of the village, they work through the night to ensure the safety of animals, and also to ensure surveillance around the perimeter of the park.

Ever since 2013, there has been talk about forming a special task force in order to combat the actions of poachers and hunters in KNP. Initially, when pressed by Right To Information (RTI) activists, the government denied the presence of paramilitary personnel in the park.¹⁴ However, it announced the formation of a Rhino Task Force, along the lines of the other counter-insurgency task forces used in the past, immediately after the assembly elections (Dutta-Choudhury 2016). Most villagers around KNP continued to insist that there were special battalions of police who lived inside the park and were responsible for the deaths of several young men and were not enthusiastic about the formation of the new force. This was at odds with urban-centric opinion that celebrated the government's efforts to protect the rhino and even expel farmers who lived along the fringes of KNP. Thus, like other parks around the world (especially in South Africa), KNP had become the site of serious contestations about the idea of conserving nature in colonised spaces, leading to the outright militarisation of the park and celebration of the killings of rhino poachers among a class of people who have little ties to the local economy, but are very vocal in the public sphere (Lunstrum 2014; Massé and Lunstrum 2016; Sachedina 2010).¹⁵

Rhinos and Poachers: A Tragic Class Struggle?

Primitive accumulation is a violent, soul-crushing process that is at once, ruthless and rapacious. In his searing description of Marx's analysis of the process, in relation to the current debates around migration in Europe, Ghassan Hage (2016) writes of the manner (and conditions) in which law can be suspended to allow for a colonisation of land and resources. In doing so, Hage (2016:6–7) points to the creation of “racialized class border, which separates [the] two different experiences in the world of national borders”, where borders are no longer the lines drawn on national maps. They are, in every sense, the kind of apartheid walls that are reiterated in everyday political discourse as well as around public places that are seen as valuable sources of wealth. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, opposition to the colonisation of Assam's wealth-producing capacities remained an emotive motif in left-wing separatist political mobilisation. However, the years of counter-insurgency (1990 until the present day) created conditions for appropriation of public wealth—mostly by individuals and groups close to those engaged in counter-insurgency—while making it difficult for disparate groups to extend solidarity to one another. Sanjib Baruah (2007) had alluded to such a process in his seminal critique of developmentalist frames that were undertaken as part of the counter-insurgency efforts to win hearts and minds in the Assam. For a place where ideas of citizenship and belonging are often subjected to the twin tests of political violence and economic want, the uncritical acceptance of a developmental discourse that lacks nuance can leave a region with more problems than the ones that policy makers sought to remove.

This was most apparent in the manner in which the government evicted thousands of people from the fringes of KNP on 19 September 2016, leading to the deaths of two people.¹⁶ Yet again, the rhetoric represented two polar views on who belonged to the area. For the farmers and the few political groups that supported them, the eviction represented the government's attempts to criminalise subsistence farmers who were settled in the area by successive administrations. For the government, as well as a vocal middle-class urban constituency, the eviction represented a commitment to the court's order to cleanse the park of settlers and immigrants. In their seminal volume on violent environmental conflicts, Nancy Peluso and Michael Watts (2001) show how ethnicity, occupation and class converge during moments of social and political upheaval and uncertainty. Emerging from three decades of counter-insurgency and identity-based political mobilisation, the political and economic situation in Assam is poised at such a moment right now.

In 2011, the state government had announced that there were approximately 200,000 registered unemployed youth in Assam, and in the absence of any large-scale manufacturing industries, many of the unemployed would have had to scramble for skills to create livelihood opportunities. These conditions lay the foundations of an environment that is rife with political tension and economic uncertainties. Hence, the manner in which the government deals with such frictions can be telling. In July 2016, the state's finance minister, Mr Himanta Biswa Sarma, tabled a fairly ambitious budget that had, above all else, a promise of the disbursement of 1.60 crore rupees to 25,425 villages across Assam under the Chief Minister Samagra Gramya Unnayan Yojana scheme. The government's vision was to

encourage fishery, dairy, organic high-value crops, land management and conservation, cottage industry, road and broadband connectivity, market linkages and sports in order to double farm incomes by 2021/22. This was supported by an apposite economic argument that saw a marginal increase of 0.88% of farm income between 2003 and 2013.¹⁷ The government's investment is not enough wealth that is needed to push growth in the rural sector, but as Tania Murray Li's (2014) work shows, it is a tacit acknowledgement that subsistence farmers have to find other skills.¹⁸

The rhinoceros, its protectors and poacher, are therefore locked in a luckless battle. The anti-immigration rhetoric that seeks to lay the onus of rhino poaching on subsistence farmers—many of whom are either Muslims or belong to indigenous communities like the Mishing—has come to coalesce with an aggressive middle-class idea of the rhino being synonymous with Assamese identity and pride. This has not managed to deter departmental officers, NGOs, entrepreneurs, some impoverished forest guards and poor young farmers from profiteering at the cost of the upkeep of the park and its surroundings.¹⁹ Hence, for subsistence farmers around KNP, the lack of protests against the evictions were emblematic of a growing disconnect between the urban and the rural, especially in the consequences of militarisation of conservation in KNP. This helps reinforce the idea that the conservation discourse in Assam is a continuation of the government's authoritarian approach to development, one that is able to bypass constitutional law and appeal to a small class of beneficiaries.

The rhino's ambiguous relationship with marginalised farmers on the fringes of militarised national parks is poised for a transformation under a hyper-nationalist, developmentalist regime. This uncritical celebration of the rhino has resulted in converting KNP into a palimpsest of militarisation in the wider region, problematising an already difficult relationship between subsistence farming communities and animals, and encourages the expansion of anti-Muslim, anti-tribal and anti-farmer sentiments among the middle classes. In ignoring the violence that is being perpetrated, ostensibly for the protection of the animal, there arises a parallel risk of the hardening of borders between both animal and human, as well as between different classes of humans in Assam. The rhino–human relationship in Assam—mediated as it is by an increase in violence—is characteristic of the militaristic rhetoric that underlines political responses to economic questions about impoverishment and inequality in India.

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Endnotes

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NfxjWdzO8dk> (last accessed 14 October 2015).

² Politicians elsewhere, notably in Africa as well as the United States, have drawn connections between anti-poaching actions and the need for security. US Secretary of State

Hilary Clinton (2009–2013) and US President Barack Obama (2009–2017) have made public statements to draw links between wildlife trafficking, poaching and global security (Duffy et. al. 2015).

³ The RTI appeal was filed by the legal advocacy group Human Rights Law Network (HRLN) in September 2014.

⁴ Eco-Development Committees are bodies, set up by the forest department in consultation with local villagers. The functionaries of the EDC are tasked with dispensing some funds for setting up self-help groups, piggeries and weaving centres for farmers who live near the park.

⁵ Ever since the 1990s, “surrenders” have had a special meaning for political commentators, human rights activists and media professionals in Assam. In the course of its counter-insurgency war against insurgents, the state—including the police, paramilitary and the army—had constituted a very controversial system of surrenders for rebels. In return for surrendering arms, former rebels would be given lucrative business deals and contracts, as well as immunity/impunity from criminal prosecution (Barbora 2014:110–127).

⁶ Compensation for livestock lost to tigers and leopards was considerably easier to come by. Government bodies like the National Tiger Conservation Authority (Project Tiger), as well as INGOs like World Wildlife Fund (WWF), work closely with the forest department as well as park authorities when cases of attacks on livestock are reported in the vicinity of the parks. Some professional conservationists argue that these compensatory programmes are prone to being manipulated by crafty people, who knowingly keep scores of old, near-dying cattle “just so the tigers may pick them up” (said Mr Saha). cursory investigations into the material conditions of those who claim compensation, as well as those who provide the money seem to suggest that claimants remain poor. WWF or Project Tiger, on the other hand, have not been pauperised by these compensatory efforts.

⁷ Gohain’s views are preciséd here, since he responded to the article critiquing his original position. In explaining his views, Gohain underlined the puzzle that continues to nag students of economics: why do people leave home for poorly paid jobs, when the same jobs could possibly be created in the place of origin?

⁸ The authors’ views, again, are preciséd here. They raised important questions about the agrarian transformation in Assam, pointing out that the archetype of the peasant no longer existed, giving way instead to a migratory labourer with very few specialised skills.

⁹ In *Land’s End*, Li (2014) brings to light a situation that seems to connect much of the developing world but speaks specifically to the situation in places where land (for subsistence farmers) was thought to be in abundance. Taking on modernisation theorists, she shows how in places like Central Sulawesi (Indonesia), subsistence farmers are unable to secure alternatives to agriculture, even as they realise that their capacity to earn a livelihood through farming has become untenable. Nor are they able to transform into workers in manufacturing (or mining) sectors because they do not exist in scales that are able to replace subsistence farming. The situation in Assam is much the same, with a generation of people who are migrating to other parts of India for work.

¹⁰ This included an unpopular move to designate the park as a tiger reserve in 2009. Fearing evictions from the area, local villagers, resort owners, safari operators and others who earn a livelihood from KNP came out to protest and stall the move. A local NGO engaged in conservation bore the brunt of the people’s ire as they were prevented from carrying out their work there.

¹¹ As reported in *The Sentinel*, 9 February 2016. In India, the chief secretary has an elevated position with the bureaucracy that carries considerable power and clout. For the High Court to take up the issue with its fraternal institution in governing the state was a significant step.

¹² Editorial in the *Assam Tribune*, 8 May 2015.

¹³ Rosaleen Duffy and colleagues (2015), in their discussion on the shifting drivers of poaching, have pointed out that poaching cannot be understood simply as a response to material deprivation. It could also be prestige and custom, as some of the people I spoke to confirm in the course of our conversations.

¹⁴ Ministry of Environment and Forests (MOEF) memo number KNP/FG-439/RTI-Act/Pf/General. I am grateful to activists of the Human Rights Law Network for making this information available, as well as for filing the RTI application.

¹⁵ Geographer Elizabeth Lunstrum (2014) draws a connection between the extensive use of paramilitary forces, technology, military hardware and killings of poachers who challenge the sovereignty of the State, in conservation efforts. Francis Massé and Lunstrum (2016) also show how a security-oriented logic is instrumental in dispossessing vulnerable populations, while allowing for accumulation by others. Both processes have been playing out in Assam over the past two decades.

¹⁶ For more details, see *Hindustan Times* (2016b).

¹⁷ Figures cited from the Minister's speech, available online at: <http://assam.gov.in/documents/1037934/4130820/Budget%20Speech%20%28English%29%202016%20-%202017?version=1.0&t=1469616780000> (last accessed 30 November 2016).

¹⁸ The government has a registered organisation called the Employment Generation Mission to address the problem of under-employment in the rural and urban sectors. It solicits help from other registered NGOs and institutions to impart skills to unemployed rural and urban youth. The nature of skills imparted range from hospitality, operating machines, sewing and marketing to tourism and travel. For more details, see <http://egmassam.org/> (last accessed 24 November 2016).

¹⁹ On 14 June 2016 the Assam Police arrested a District Forest Officer and found large sums of money, animal skin and ivory in his house (*Assam Tribune* 2016).

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