



Esmond Bradley Martin

Lucy Vigne holds two black rhino horns in an Unani medicine clinic in Bombay.

The trade in African rhino horn in India

by Lucy Vigne and Esmond Bradley Martin

For centuries, Gujaratis from the west coast of India have been trading on the East African coast. They brought back to India rhino horn and probably also rhino hide, from which shields used to be made. In the nineteenth century, Zanzibar was the main entrepot in East Africa for rhino horn and ivory. Gujaratis handled most of the rhino horn, shipping it in steamers across the Indian Ocean and in dhows helped by the monsoon winds to Bombay. From there, much of the horn continued its journey to China and south-east Asia, to be used by the Chinese mainly as a fever-reducing drug.

A market also existed for African rhino horn in western India itself. It is considered inferior to Indian horn, however, and in the nineteenth century it sold for as little as ten per cent of the price of Asian horn. The Muslim Gujaratis bought the horn primarily as an aphrodisiac and there still exists a small demand for the horn by some supporters of traditional Unani medicine. Hindus, however, do not use the horn since they believe in Ayurvedic medicine, which rarely contains

It is widely believed in the western world that rhino horn products are used in Asia primarily as an aphrodisiac. In fact it is only amongst the Muslims of Gujarat that this is so.

animal products. The western Indian market is thus a small one mainly based on aphrodisiac demand.

In any event, less than one per cent of all rhino horn put on to the world market today is used as an aphrodisiac. Yet the majority of the western world still thinks that this is the horn's sole use. Why should this be? When European travellers reached Zanzibar, they saw rhino horn being bought by Gujarati traders and asked them its use. The Indians explained that it was taken as an aphrodisiac, and the European travellers incorrectly assumed that it was used by the Chinese for this purpose as well. This was reported in western literature in the

late nineteenth century and it has proved very hard to dispel the myth.

In 1986, we carried out a survey of rhino products in India and found no rhino horn available in the larger cities such as Calcutta, Delhi, Hyderabad, Lucknow and Patna. Even in Ahmedabad, Baroda and elsewhere in the state of Gujarat, where rhino horn was used widely as an aphrodisiac probably up until the late 1960s, no rhino horn is sold in the medicine shops today. We did see it for sale in Bombay, however, in the Muslim Pydhoni area. Esmond Martin first reported this in 1980 and it is described in his book *Rhino Exploitation*. In 1986, we found an Unani medicine clinic in the Pydhoni area, still with a black rhino horn in a display window even though it is banned. The owner of the clinic (who is a well respected *hakim* or Muslim doctor) told us he kept two more black rhino horns at home. He brought them to the clinic for us to see the next day.

One was an impressive 2.4 kg, and from the other, the *hakim* took scrapings for clients. The horn is thought to be extremely powerful and only tiny quantities are needed, about 10

... rhino horn

gm per dose. It is ground into a powder, mixed with herbs and bound together with honey or ghee (clarified butter), often being made into capsules to be swallowed. It is not applied externally.

In the late 1970s, about 500 gm of rhino horn were sold per year from this clinic, but by 1986, the *hakim* said he would use the equivalent of 75 gm in one year, with only a few sales each year. The reason for this is due to the relative expense, about two dollars per gram (an urban labourer's daily wage), while many other supposed aphrodisiac substances are considered just as effective and most of them are much cheaper.

The owner had purchased the horns around 1970 from Gujarati merchants in the Chor Bazaar (popularly known as the 'Thieves Market'). We made a survey of this market, but could find none. However, small quantities of African rhino horn still come into western India from time to time. The owner of the clinic said that he had been offered another rhino horn in 1985, which he did not buy because his customers hardly ever wanted to purchase any nowadays.

Since 1972, it has been illegal to import African rhino horn into India, but that which was brought in before the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, can be kept if it has been declared. After independence in Kenya and Tanzania in the early 1960s, many Indians returned to Bombay taking rhino horn with them. Nevertheless, it is now so rare that when, in 1977, one Gujarati was seen with a couple of horns, these were confiscated. Legal proceedings were initiated, and it was not until the Gujarati proved that he had obtained them in Kenya before 1972 and had further declared them as his personal assets on his wealth tax return that the case was dropped. Since then, no African rhino horn has been confiscated or



This bottle of black rhino horn powder, photographed in Bombay, has been mixed with herbs to be sold in small quantities to Gujaratis as an aphrodisiac.

found by customs officials in western India.

To sum up — although a lot of rhino horn came into India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from East Africa, probably most of it was re-exported, but unfortunately there are no official Indian trade statistics. During the twentieth century, the demand for rhino horn declined dramatically. The last significant quantities were imported into India in the early and mid-1960s. Since 1980, no horn has been available in Gujarat while in Bombay there is less horn being consumed today than a few years ago. India's trade in African rhino horn is, therefore, no longer a conservation problem.

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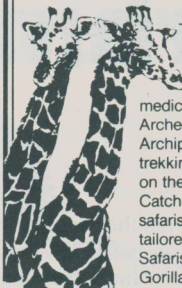


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