

Lady Curzon and the establishment of Kaziranga National Park

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In the recent book *India's Unicorns*, Divyabhanusingh (2018) dismisses in a few paragraphs the myth that Lady Curzon, the wife of the Viceroy, was instrumental in starting the process, which led to the establishment of Kaziranga as a game reserve. He could be brief, because many historical documents on the history of the Park had been collected by Barthakur and Sahgal (2005). They were careful in their wording, but certainly suggested that Lady Curzon did not contribute as reported.

There are several versions of the story, which generally read like this. During her trip to Assam in January 1905 [sic], Lady Curzon expressed an interest in visiting the Naharjan tea estate. A planter named Forbes had earlier informed her that wildlife was abundant in that area. Forbes had arranged three elephants to facilitate game viewing, and had asked a local *shikari* called Nigona to accompany her. Nigona, later identified as Balaram Hazarika, emphasized the plight of the rhino, as the party could only find footprints and never saw the animal itself. Lady Curzon conveyed her disappointment to her husband, the Viceroy, who proceeded to take steps towards preservation of the area (Gohkale and Kashyap 2005, Deka 2005).

Such stories told in hindsight cannot be totally wrong. However, a 1905 date is unlikely to be correct, as Lady Curzon went to England in January 1904 with her husband, delivered a baby on 20 March 1904, after which she fell ill, and only arrived back in Calcutta in March 1905. She returned to England with her husband in August 1905, where, on 18 July 1906, she died (Bradley 1986, Thomas 2004). If her excursion in Kaziranga didn't take place in 1905, does this account perhaps refer to the 1900 visit?

The American born Mary Victoria Curzon, Baroness of Kedleston (1870-1906), had come to India when her husband, George Nathaniel Curzon, 1st Marquess Curzon of Kedleston

(1859-1925), was appointed Viceroy in 1899. Just over a year later, they visited Assam, traveling from 6 to 16 March 1900 from Guwahati to Dibrugarh and stopping at various places on the way. This official trip was closely followed by the press and there were regular updates in the *Times of India*. The Chief Commissioner of Assam from 1896 to 1902, Sir Henry John Stedman Cotton (1845-1915) attended the whole trip (*Times of India*, 10 March 1900). Traveling by steamer and train, they reached Dibrugarh in Upper Assam on 7 March (*Times of India*, 9 March 1900). On the return journey, they arrived in Tezpur on Friday 9 March, as reported in the *Times of India* (13 March 1900): "A most enthusiastic welcome was accorded to the Viceroy and Lady Curzon on their arrival at Tezpur on Friday. A large number of guests and officials from all parts of Assam were present to welcome their Excellencies. A number of ladies were presented to Lady Curzon by Colonel Buckingham. In the evening the Viceregal party were entertained at dinner by the Planters." The next morning, they "left Tezpur for the rubber forests at Balipara [north of Tezpur]. A mounted escort of the Assam Valley Light Horse Volunteers met and conducted his Excellency to Adabarrie, the residence of Mr. M. Chamney, where *chhota-hazri* [early breakfast] was served. After visiting and inspecting the rubber forests and planting a tree in honour of the occasion, the Viceroy and party left for Borjula Garden, the residence of Mr. Moore, where a large company of ladies and gentlemen had been invited to breakfast to meet his Excellency." That afternoon they travelled by steamship from Tezpur back to Guwahati, reaching on 12 March (*Times of India*, 15 March 1900).

I have been unable to find mention of a visit to a tea plantation near Nowgong in these proceedings. In the 13 March 1900 newspaper report of the Saturday excursion, Lady Curzon is not mentioned specifically, but it appears unlikely that she would have traveled independently in an opposite direction without this having been noticed. However, to tie in with the possible history of the start of Kaziranga, it is quite possible that

she talked to the planter Forbes of the Naharjan Tea Estate located on the edge of the future reserve, maybe during the evening function in Tezpur. The Naharjan estate is mentioned in the *Assam District Gazetteer* of 1906: “Naharjan, owned by Messrs. Pringle and Forbes, situated in Namdayang, on 13 Dec 1903 comprising 1514 acres of which 505 were planted, with a labour force of 480 workers” (Allen 1906:254). The owners Pringle and Forbes have not been identified.

It is becoming clear that probably the gist of the story is true, but that over the years the details were lost. The exact year and the name of the visiting dignitary had become clouded in memory, and were added at a more recent date.

I suggest that Lady Curzon was not involved. It must have been another lady married to a high-placed official who failed to see the rhinoceros in Naharjan. Waller (1972) stated, without further detail, that it was the wife of the Chief Commissioner of Assam on a visit in 1906. I don't think that date particularly fits, so the visit must have been a few years earlier. The Chief Commissioner from 1896-1902 was Sir Cotton as mentioned above, from 1902-1906 it was Sir Joseph Bampfylde Fuller (1854-1935).

The proceedings which led to the constitution of Kaziranga as a Reserved Forest in the Preliminary Notification 2442R on 1 June 1905 are now reasonably well-known as written by Barthakur and Sahgal (2005). It had taken just three years from the first official statements of concern of the reduced numbers of rhinoceros in November 1902 by John Campbell Arbuthnott (1858-1923), Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, and followed up by Chief Commissioner Fuller, with the help of Major Philip Richard Thornhagh Gurdon (b.1863), Deputy Commissioner Eastern Bengal and Assam Commission, and Edward Statter Carr (1857-1925), Conservator of Forests from 1902. The final constitution of the Kaziranga Reserved Forest with an extent of 56,544 acres (226.17 km²) followed on 3 January 1908 as per Notification No.37F (Assam Forest Dept. 1908: 30).

In the early days of Kaziranga as a reserved forest, the German traveller and hunter Oscar Kauffmann (1874-1924) visited the area. The Assistant Deputy Commissioner of Golaghat (probably LJ Kershaw) told him that the Kaziranga jungle was open for shooting, and the tea planters

in the area all agreed. As he had received contradictory advice from the Deputy Commissioner (probably Arthur William Botham), Kauffmann only hunted on the fringes of the reserve, although he was disappointed to hear that the Deputy Commissioner himself went hunting in the Park. He saw just two rhinos for a short moment, and found that the local Assamese had put up huts in the swamps near Bokakhat where they shot at every rhinoceros in sight, because the horn could fetch up to 300 rupees (Kauffmann 1911).

There were many influential people at the start of the 20th century concerned about the state of wildlife. Through their efforts, we now have the possibility to view the rhinoceros and other endangered species in a National Park like Kaziranga. However, history shows that Lady Curzon was not directly involved in the origins of Kaziranga National Park.

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