



Marg Marches

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How the Rhino's Place in Assamese Tradition Helped Save the Species

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On Wednesday, around 2500 rhino horns [were burnt by forest officials in Assam](#) to mark World Rhino Day. The event was organized to discourage people from killing the rare species or purchasing horns sold illegally.

The Greater One-Horned Rhinoceros is native to the Indian subcontinent, and Assam is home to roughly 70% of its population. The conservation of this species is considered as "one of Asia's biggest success stories". As WWF notes, there has been an "increase in the number of one-horned rhinos, from around 200 at the turn of the 20th century to around 3,700 today."

Recently, this success story has become a political tool, with parties promising to "save the pride of Assam" and using the symbol to connect with the voting population, as reported in this [article by Tora Agarwala in *The Indian Express*](#).

The "gainda" or "gaur", as the rhino is referred to in Hindi or in Assamese respectively, has been written about and depicted in art since ancient times in the Indian subcontinent. There were several reasons for the decline in their numbers, including rampant hunting for "sport" and medicinal purposes. In 1954, the Chief Minister of Assam wrote to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru conveying that the rhino was on the verge of extinction in his state.

In Assam, the animal has been a longstanding symbol of pride, used in government signages and brand logos. In addition to the efforts of the government and NGOs, one of the factors leading to the "return" of the rhino in Assam is its unique place in the region's culture and traditions. Conservationist Divyabhanusinh touches upon a few local legends in Marg's 2018 book [The Story of India's Unicorns](#), co-written by art historian Asok Kumar Das and scholar Shibani Bose. The following excerpt is from the book:

"According to one legend the Princess of Sonitpur, daughter of King Ban, had a dream of a handsome prince with whom she fell in love. Her friend Princess Chitrlekha drew likenesses of all the eligible princes of India until finally she drew a picture of Aniruddha, the grandson of Lord Krishna, whom the princess recognized as her dream prince. Aniruddha came to Sonitpur to fetch the princess and apparently he was confined there by the king. Then Lord Krishna arrived, riding on a rhinoceros all the way from Dwarka,

to rescue Aniruddha. He left his mount in Kaziranga to graze and crossed the Brahmaputra to wage war.

Upon the successful completion of his mission he played his flute to call the rhinoceros who could not hear it because of the sound of the flowing waters of the river. Lord Krishna was annoyed. He disowned his mount and proceeded to Dwarka without it. The mount loved the environment of the green grass and stayed back. Hence the animal's presence in Kaziranga. It is also believed that the animal has no hair on its body as it was saddled for battle, according to a variant of the legend, and thus has hair only on its ears and tail tip! According to yet another legend, Lord Krishna's mount was readied for battle with armour. Later, it was considered unsuitable for war and abandoned; however the armour remained, thus explaining the folds of its armour-like skin which it bequeathed to its descendants."

And so, through stories and art, the iconic rhinoceros found its place in the hearts of the Assamese. However, as Divyabhanusinh also notes in the book, regional pride and possessiveness over the rhino has caused issues, with Assam being reluctant to relocate rhinoceros outside the state in the past.

While local pride is definitely a positive for conservation efforts, can it lead to impediments when it comes to politics and relocation initiatives?

Photograph: Theo Allofs/Minden Pictures/Dinodia.

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