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Saving the rhino: India must involve Karbi tribes to stop poachers

BY GAUTAMAN BHASKARAN on MARCH 11, 2016 in ASIA TIMES NEWS & FEATURES, INDIA

The rhinoceros is arguably one of the ugliest mammals on earth. But it is worth millions of dollars and is chased and killed by men, hunting it down most cruelly for its horn. Said to weigh anywhere from 500 grams to a kilogram and a half, each horn can fetch between \$480,000 and \$800,000 in the international market.

The horn is used for making medicines to cure cancer and impotency, and is widely sought after in countries like China, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines.

Much like tiger parts that are also used for similar purposes, the rhino horn has no scientifically proven curative values.

Yet, man — often driven to despair by debilitating diseases or a penis that refuses to perform — seeks out the illogical and the irrational in the faintest of hope that he would be cured. Some rich Vietnamese keep a horn at home believing that it will bring them peace of mind.

It is this blind belief that the poacher pounces upon to make his invaluable kill. At one point in time, one tiger a day was being butchered in India. The story of the rhino is not as bad, but this year alone, three rhinos were shot dead in the Kaziranga National Park in the north-eastern state of Assam, and their horns taken away by AK 47-toting poachers — who engage poorly armed and under-nourished forest guards in battles that are lost even before they begin.

In the past decade, several hundreds of rhinos have been butchered, their horns sliced off their bodies, and, often, they are left bleeding to die a painfully horrible death.

Apart from Kaziranga, there are three other national parks and wildlife sanctuaries in Assam — Manas, Orang and Pobitora — and together these are home to about 90% of the one-horned rhino in the world. There are 2,625 rhinos in Assam today, according the latest census. Twenty rhinos were poached last year, according to official report, while the real figures may be much



At least 20 rhinos were poached in India in 2015

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higher. Some years ago, it was found that the Panna Tiger Reserve (in the central Indian state of Uttar Pradesh) had not a single animal left when just a few months earlier, the official version had shown the number to be somewhat impressive.

Whatever it be, poaching continues — and flourishes — largely because of the help from villagers. There are widespread encroachments inside rhino reserves especially by Karbi tribes who are pushed into promoting poaching because of economic deprivation.

Dependent on agriculture, most families among the Karbi tribe and others do not have adequate land to sustain themselves. Also, the Brahmaputra changes its course often — particularly during the monsoon when the river is in heavy spate — flooding the farmlands on its banks and destroying crops.

So the money that comes from poachers is of immense benefit. For every kill, the family which helps poachers is paid around Rs20,000 (\$298) and villagers extend a lot of ground support to the killers like food, shelter and mobile telephone SIM cards.

A top police officer stationed in the area, who does not wish to be named for reasons of safety, told me that “despite excellent intelligence inputs, we cannot arrest the guilty villagers, because the issue then turns into a law and order problem. They barricade highways and create havoc with the flow of traffic.”

Most “poachers come into Assam from the neighbouring states of Nagaland and Manipur — which border Myanmar. It is this country which serves as the hub for the rhino horn — both as the point of entry (from India) and exit (to south-east Asia)”, he explained.

A graver problem was the “insurgency angle.” Both Manipur and Nagaland have insurgents whose demands among other things include separation from India.

It is commonly believed that the rhino horn also aids the rebellion — which can be compared to the African blood diamond. The precious stone, illegally mined in Africa, has been used to fund civil wars in Angola, Congo and Sierra Leone.

But Africa has also shown a remarkable way to check rhino poaching. The world’s first all-women anti-poaching unit, called Black Mambas, has been highly effective in curbing this menace in South Africa.

As a report in *The Guardian* says: “The poachers will fall — but it will not be with guns and bullets. It’s their (Black Mambas) success in reducing rhino deaths and breaking down the barriers between poor communities and elite wildlife reserves that is their most powerful weapon in the war on poaching... Since forming in 2013, the Black Mambas have seen a 76% reduction in snaring and poaching incidents within their area of operation in the Balule nature reserve in the country’s north-east.

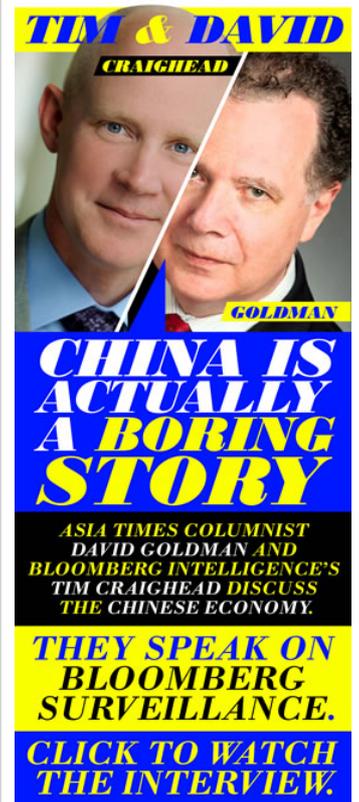
“The 26 Mambas, all from disadvantaged communities on the border of the park, were given six weeks of paramilitary training and wildlife education, and they work alongside 29 armed guards and an intelligence team that seeks to stop the poachers before they can kill. Day-to-day duties include patrols of up to 20 km a day on foot and by vehicle at night, pulling out snares, conducting roadblocks and assisting with tracking collars,” the report said.

This is the whole point about poaching. It is imperative to involve local villagers — the Karbis in the case of India — if one hopes to stop the poacher in his murderous track. Like the Mambas, who are poor, the Karbis live in poverty, and the Indian government can moot a plan to rope them in to save the rhino. In the bargain, the tribe can hope to earn an honest living.

More importantly, human settlements on the periphery of a forest or even inside it that make it logistically easy for an unholy cooperation between the poacher and the villager must be removed — however hard such a move may hit the political vote bank.

Gautaman Bhaskaran is an author, commentator and movie critic, who has worked with The Statesman in Kolkata and The Hindu in Chennai for 35 years. He now writes for the Hindustan Times, the Gulf Times and Seoul Times.

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