

# The Story of India's Unicorns

Divyabhanusinh, Asok Kumar Das and Shibani Bose

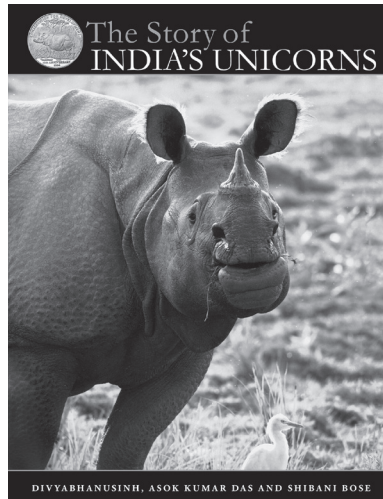
Reviewed by Lucy Vigne

PO Box 24849, Nairobi 00502, Kenya  
email: lucy.vigne@gmail.com

What a beautifully presented book on a subject close to my—and many people's—heart, India's greater one-horned rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*), is a species well deserving more attention which this account happily provides. In the wild today they number '3,500-plus, a distinct improvement on the figure of about 200 estimated in 1900' but major concern for their future 'stares us in the face', the book states.

The book is skillfully laid out with a wonderful collection of illustrations, mainly in colour, on nearly every page. Good paper and printing contribute to its quality. This is an in-depth study, much more so than its first appearance as a handsome coffee table book, and is the third in a series called "The Story" (the first being Asia's Lions and second Asia's Elephants). The series looks at wild animals of distinction in India, which have intertwined with the history of humankind and examines the relationship between the two. The book's purpose is to reach a wide audience to spread awareness about India's rhinos and how one species has survived among humans against the odds, and to gain more support for the protection of rhinos that remain in their natural habitat.

*The Story of India's Unicorns* has been written by three authors, each with different specialties and perspectives, bringing a fascinating breadth to the book. The first and last two chapters are written by the natural historian, Divyabhanusinh; two are by the archeologist, Shibani Bose and two by the art historian, Asok Kumar Das. There are



clear Notes and a Bibliography at the end.

It starts by emphasizing today's threat to rhinos of the 1.32 billion people competing for space in India, as well as the illegal trade in rhino horn. Endemic to the Indian subcontinent, until about 1924, were all three species of Asian rhinos mainly found in northeast India. Living in the Sunderbans near the Bay of Bengal there was the Javan or lesser one-horned rhino (subspecies *Rhinoceros sondaicus indermis*). Indermis means unarmed as the female

had no horn. And there was the Sumatran rhino, the oldest species of all, the subspecies *Dicerorhinus sumatransis lasiotis* living in India.

The book focuses on the extant greater one-horned rhino that stretched in modern history across the wet grassland regions of northern India. It was known as the mythical 'unicorn', with a horn growing to 24 inches (61 cm)—the longest one recorded is kept in the Natural History Museum in London. The local names for this rhino originated from the Sanskrit 'khadiga' meaning sword or scimitar referring to the horn. Some early travellers and writers described the animal as horse-like, revering the so-called 'unicorn' for living a solitary peaceful life; and one, which was also considered an exemplary way of Buddhist life.

The first well-known illustration was that by Albrecht Durer (a woodcut based on an Indian rhino that arrived in Lisbon from India in 1515). Later paintings and drawings proliferated in the West as live rhinos were brought to 18<sup>th</sup>-century Europe as curiosities, and they were depicted in European art adorning tapestries, porcelain and clocks.

But in India, their importance goes back to

prehistory when their range covered far more of India with much of the country a mosaic of forests, grassland and marshland as favoured by rhinos. Rhino bone tools have been found and Mesolithic rock shelters reveal about 30 rhino figures in the rock art of northern/central India. Most are of rhino hunts, sometimes with multi-barbed harpoons and vessels to collect the meat. People had a special relationship with rhinos then, Shibani Bose believes, with the eyes clearly visible in pictures, unlike other animals. Later in the urban Harappan civilization, 2600-1900 BCE, people settled along the alluvial rivers where these rhinos lived. Rhinos appear frequently on seals, terracotta tablets and copper tablets, the most dominant species seen in art, suggesting an even closer bond with humans. Some rhinos are intriguingly pictured over a trough presumably for food. Were these food offerings to a worshipped animal or could there have been tame or domesticated rhinos, Bose questions, as collars on some rhino portrayals also suggest?

Rhinos barely feature in Hindu mythology, however, petering out in favour of elephants that became important domesticated animals. But in ancient Indian texts, the strength-giving properties of rhino meat are described. Their horns in India were not generally used in art or medicine as in China, where in later years, rulers sent them as treasured gifts.

When the Mughal, Akbar, invaded India he saw his first rhino in 1519 and was in awe. The rhino features prominently in India in Mughal paintings, especially in the reigns of Akbar and Jahangir who were both patrons of the arts, inveterate hunters and nature enthusiasts. Pictures show hunts with spears, bows and arrows and later musket rifles. In 1608-09, the English traveller William Finch records seeing drinking cups and buckles of rhino horn traded in the ancient city of Ayodhya and commented on the high price that rhino horn fetched. Thomas Coryat in 1615-16 saw 'unicorns' in the King's menagerie. He described the animal as 'the strangest beast in the world'. The Mughals made shields out of rhino hide and archers' thumb rings and earrings from the horn for princes and nobles. Many Indian rulers and dignitaries enjoyed rhino hunts, and some members of the British Raj recorded the sport in detail.

The book also describes how in Nepal the ruling Ranas were keen protectors of their rhinos so that they and their permitted guests could go on organized hunts. They effectively 'preserved the object of their sport'. In India, it is sad to reflect that it took a very serious decline in their numbers before rhinos were protected in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The latter part of the book illustrates the successful translocation of rhinos in 2012 from Kaziranga National Park (NP) to Manas National Park in Assam and expresses the importance of expanding their range further.

There are only a few figures that don't match the Table's rhino numbers, and some Latin misspellings in the Appendix. Photos concentrate on Kaziranga and Manas NPs (with some of the other protected areas, which hold rhinos lacking photographs), but all reproductions are of excellent quality. The main body of the text is clearly written by scholars with a passion for rhinos. It is refreshing to have experts in natural history, archeology and art history share their findings and knowledge of India's rhinos, while incorporating work from other scholars, in such an informative and interesting fashion.

### *Postscript*

In a section on rhino horn in traditional Indian medicine, pp.118-119, describing investigative work Esmond Martin and I carried out in 1988/89, Esmond is described as having worked on 'arguably the most authoritative survey of the use of rhinoceros body parts', referring to his earlier book *Rhino Exploitation* published by WWF Hong Kong in 1983. This is a welcome accolade about Esmond's early research on uses of rhino products as described here before his tragic death in early 2018.

Published by Radhika Sabavala for the Marg Foundation; Mumbai, India; 2018. \$35.99 from Amazon Prime

ISBN 978-93-83243-23-5, 151 pp. 151