
THE RHINOCEROS FIGHT IN INDIA

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The rhinoceros is often alleged to be aggressive, not only to humans, but also to other animals. In the early Greek and Roman literature, the rhinoceros was said to be the true enemy of the elephant, always ready to fight. On the few occasions that a rhinoceros was imported into Rome, its supposed aggressive nature was used to make it fight against elephants (Pliny), bears (Martialis) or the gladiators. The first rhinoceros to arrive in post medieval Europe, in Lisbon in June 1515, was made to enter a battle-field against an elephant. In this case, the rhino only had to lift its front leg to make the elephant run away, probably scared away by the noise of the spectators. With the advent of privately owned menageries and zoological gardens, the owners were obviously reluctant to risk their valuable beasts in any kind of battle and the rhino had to be satisfied with

lesser evils like smoking a pipe or drinking a glass of wine to entertain the visitors.

In India, closer to the regions inhabited by the rhino, the tradition of the fight continued in the courts of the Mogul emperors and later of the native kings and rajahs. Actually, there are many allusions to such fights, but it is difficult to find the evidence as to when and where they would have taken place. Fray Sebastien Manrique traveled in India between 1629 and 1643 during the reign of the Mogul Emperor Shah Jahan (1627-1658) and mentioned that the emperor appeared daily around lunchtime “to witness contests between elephants and other wild animals, such as lions, tigers, *abbadas* or rhinoceros, and wild buffaloes” (Manrique, 1927) A few details are known however about rhino fights in

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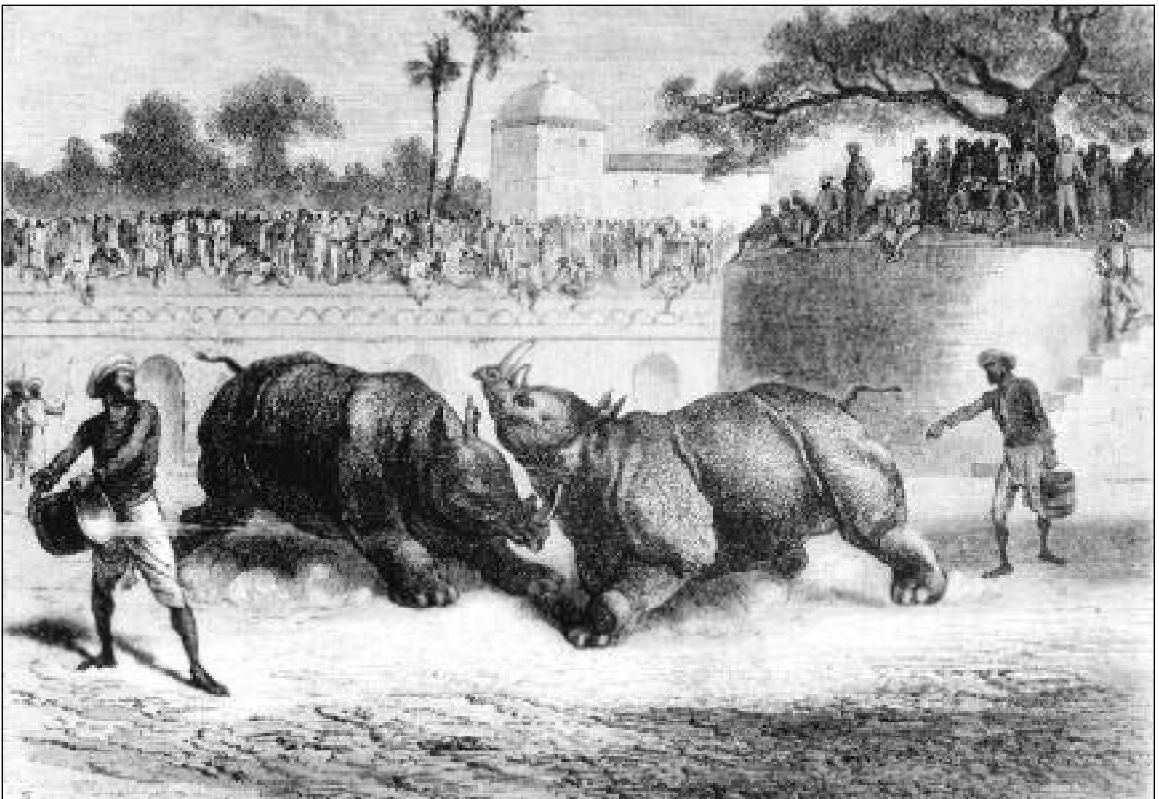


Figure 1. These rhinos were sketched in 1864 in Baroda at the time of their fight. The folded skin resembles that of the Indian species, but Indian rhinos have only one horn not two!

Lucknow around 1820 and Baroda in 1864 and 1875.

The kings or nawabs of Oudh had their capital in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. William Knighton recorded the adventures of an anonymous courtier of Nasir ud-Din Haidar in the 1820s. During those years, the King had some 15 or 20 rhinos (Rookmaaker, 1997). These were made to fight against each other, but only the males were “always ready to engage in combat at particular seasons ... duly prepared by stimulating drugs”. This seems to have been a regular pastime in those days (Knighton, 1900).

In June 1864 in the state of Gujarat, the French traveller Louis Rousselet (1845-1929) was visiting Baroda, where he witnessed two rhinos fighting each other; in paraphrase: the two animals are chained at opposite ends of the arena, one painted black, the other red, to distinguish them easily. They are released and run around the field until finally they meet and attack. Horn against horn, they hit each other until one manages to get its horn below the head of the other, but then they turn away. This

continues for an hour until their horns hurt, their lips are covered with foam and their foreheads are covered in blood. Servants throw buckets of water at them to help them recuperate and continue. At last, the King orders the fight to end and the animals return to their stables (Rousselet, 1877). This event is illustrated by an engraving (13 x 17cm) made after a drawing by E. Bayard in Rousselet’s book published in 1877 with the French title *Combat de Rhinoceros Baroda* (Figure 1). The drawing appears in the English translation and in later editions of this work. The picture is also found with a German title, *Rhinoceros-Zweikampf* in Schlagintweit (1881). It is remarkable that the rhinoceroses both are double-horned, while one would expect to see the single-horned Indian species. It is impossible to say if this is inadvertent artistic licence or actual fact

Once more in Baroda, in November 1875, the Rajah entertained the Prince of Wales and his party. Again two rhinoceroses pitched battle, perhaps the same animals as nine years previously. ‘They came nose to nose, as if to exchange civilities, but the attendants began to excite ill-

Photo Credit: Kees Rookmaaker



Figure 2. The Prince of Wales was entertained in Baroda by a rhino fight in 1875. The many attendants tried to keep the rhinos fighting by goading them with spears.

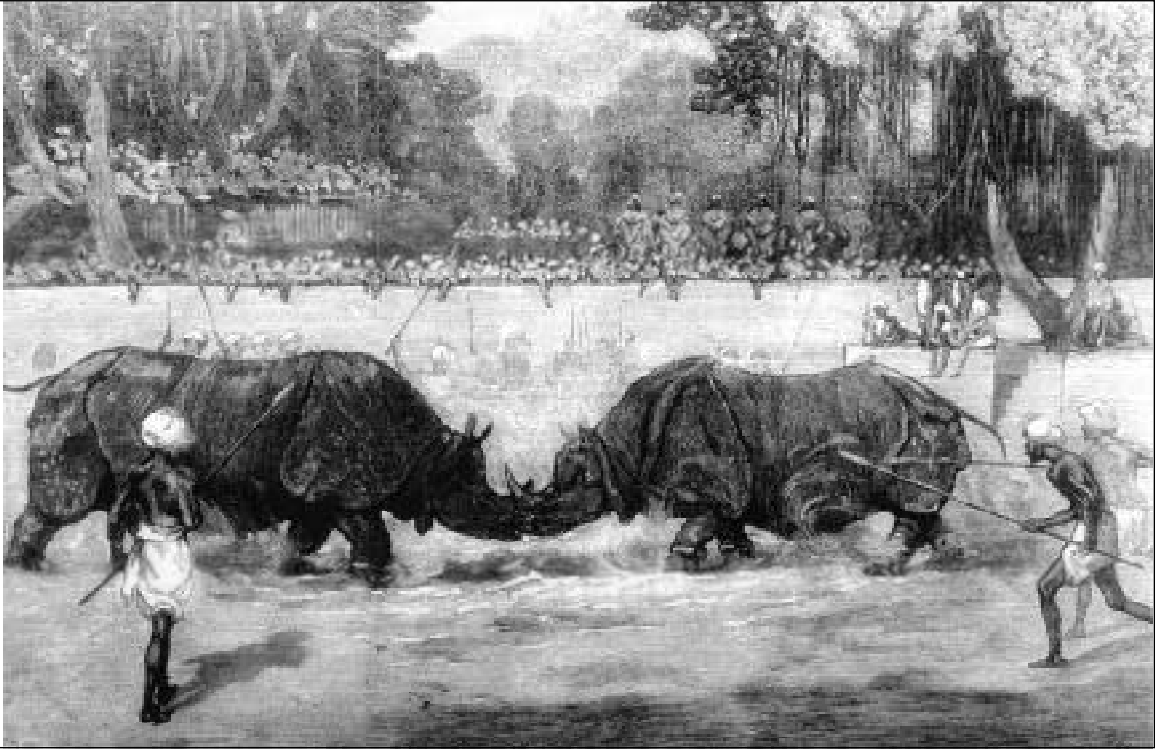


Figure 3. This second sketch of the 1875 rhino fight shows the occasion was very popular with many spectators surrounding the arena.

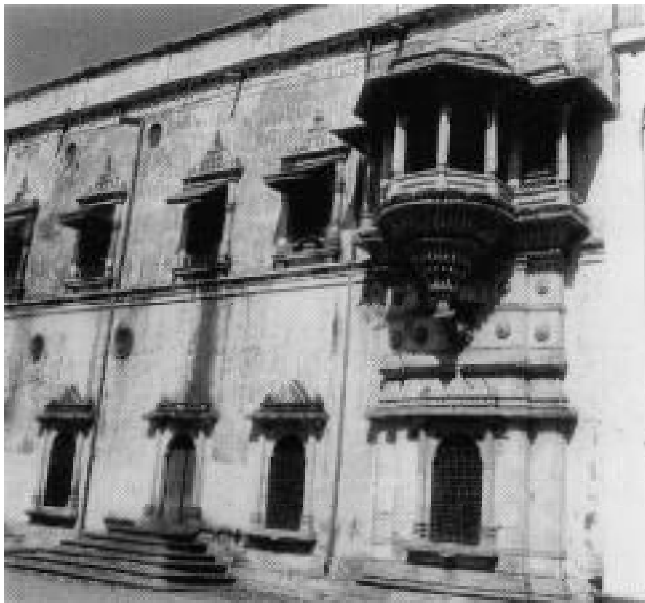


Figure 4. Around Baroda's rhino fight arena, some old buildings remain, as photographed here in 1980. Situated near the Land Revenue Office near Pani Gate, most of the arena in 1980 had been filled with modern buildings.

feelings by poking and patting them alternately, and by horrid yells, and one rhinoceros...made a thrust with his snout at his friend". They exchanged a few blows with their heads, but soon one turned away. They were "deluged with cold water to keep up their courage by the attendants", but to no avail, they could not be made to fight each other again, "exeunt two degraded rhinoceroses..." (Russell, 1877). This official account of the tour has no illustration, but a drawing was published twice in the *Illustrated London News*, firstly on 25 December 1875 (Vol.67 page 621) as shown in Figure 2, and secondly in May 1876 (Vol 68, page5). The illustration is entitled "A rhinoceros fight at Baroda before the Prince of Wales. From a sketch by one of our special artists". Each animal's front legs are chained together, they are quite adult and clearly single horned. Also on 25 December 1875 another picture of the fight was published, in Britain, in the *Graphic* (page 650), including text. Here, the fight is described as "somewhat unsuccessful, as the animals declined the combat, despite vigorous lance thrusts and buckets of cold water showered upon them by the attendants. They at first exchanged, as in our illustration, a few passes with their horned snouts, and then one ran away and could in no way be induced to come again up to time". This illustration was produced from a sketch by Mr H. Johason (Figure 3). The rhino fight, or non-fight, as they refused to oblige, perhaps reflects the gentler nature of these rhinos than many wished to believe.

With the current threat of extinction of all rhinoceros species, one hopes that such fights, exciting as some may wish them, will be a thing of past days.

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