



Pobitora Wildlife sanctuary :

The Rhino country

By SOMEN SENGUPTA



If the aroma of tea is the first identity of a charming land named Assam then without any debate an animal can be placed as an icon of Assam's power and gigantic importance in our national framework. The crowded streets of Guwahati and its nightmarish traffic system may depress you but once you know the rich culture and wildlife of Assam, it is obvious that you will change your view in a moment. Each and everyone is surprised when they come to know of the reserve forest that has highest density of a creature which is now very rare and unique.

This animal which was once found in abundance in many places of north India is now only found in various deep jungles of Assam and in Bengal. While in Bengal their number is limited, in Assam they are pride of many reserve forests. Indian rhinoceros the unique unicorn mammal with a huge structure symbolizes a powerhouse of a living creature and it is a matter of delight that they are spotted almost effortlessly in the various forests of Assam.

Assam has 2 national parks that don the title crown of UNESCO world heritage sites. Kaziranga the world famous national park of Assam that nests more than 2000 such beasts and Manas National Park. Both these are often visited by tourists but little known fact is that just 58 km from Guwahati city there is another beautiful wildlife sanctuary that houses good number of rhinos as well as many other interesting wildlife. It is a sad fact that the attraction of the famous Kaziranga and Manas make us often overlook this wildlife sanctuary, Pobitora, that is at a stone's throw away from Guwahati.

Pobitora is set in an unique picture post card setting. Here the flood plains of mighty Brahmaputra is decorated with

green hills over the horizons. Named as Mairang or Moirang, the magical hill, the place was once famous for necromancy and other black magic. Assam is known for *tantric* cult for centuries and no place is better than this wild jungle to practice such things.

The vast green grassland down the hill is spread over Garanga beel a huge water body near Brahmaputra river. From time immemorial when human population was rare in this locality the place was a game arena of many wild lives. However things started changing from 1960s when human settlement started encroachment into the jungle. Considering the increasing risk of man-animal conflict in 1961-62 an area of 38.81 sq km was demarked as Pobitora jungle. On 18th November 1971 it was announced as reserve forest and from 16th July 1987 it was officially known as Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary.

As the car stops at the doorstep of the jungle the romance of dark wood starts. A huge bill board displays details of the jungle and an army of jeep awaits for passengers to take them inside of the sanctuary. Thanks to the tourism department of Assam Govt till now not too many hotels and restaurants are allowed to come up here. Instead Assam Tourism office, at the gate helps you to understand rules of the jungle and also provides guides to see the wildlife in sound and safe way.

One can take a safari of the jungle either on elephant back or in a jeep. Tickets for both are issued from the same counter.

Elephant safari is conducted in early morning which is considered one of the best time to spot wildlife. A group of 4 to 6 people ride on each elephant's back and thanks to good training every elephant goes near the spotted animal.

Safari in jeep has its own charm and needless to say much

more comfortable and safe compares to elephant ride that moves on the bumpy roads inside the forest. Jeep safari starts from 1 pm and continues till late afternoon subject to climate. A group of 4-5 people plus an armed man from forest department goes in every jeep. A 2 hour jeep safari runs on the meadows criss-crossing the dark and deep woods. It runs over the plains where behind the blades of green grass the pride of Assam suddenly makes a majestic emergence that can often send a chill running down your back.

In Pobitora, rhinos can be found almost everywhere. Be it in mud or behind the bush or behind the small blades of grasses they are watching you from every corner with keen eyes and as it is their kingdom it will be wise to behave like an obedient subject in front of them.

Jeep drivers are well trained to understand the mood of the animals. They know how close to go or how loud to make the engine roar. The huge beast generally watches more and moves less but in never accepts any kind of disturbance. A big full grown bull is always dangerous. Equally dangerous is a female rhino with her baby if she feels unsafe in proximity of humans. They are excellent in smelling but with poor eye sight. One that makes rhino special is its thick skin which is folded with cracks on it. Males have thick necks with a lump of flesh under it. They have single horn unlike of their African cousin. The horn prevails both in male and female but not in infant. The horn is made of pure keratin, a substance from which human finger nails are made. As rhino is a solitary living animal, it does not form large groups in common. Except mating time male and female hardly come close to each other. However females are often seen with babies. So in Pobitora, rhinoceros, many in number, roam around alone.

Rhinos found here are mostly

gray and faded black in colour. Their massive structure is almost 6 ft in height. Rhino that is found in Pobitora is a typical Indian rhino - a wonder to the world.

In size Indian rhinos are the biggest in the world. An Indian rhino weighs between 2260 kg to 4000 kg and the males outweigh the females. Mostly found in the alluvial grassland and riverine, this critically endangered creature in size is second only to the Asian elephant. Surprising it may sound, but the fact remains Indian rhinos are bigger than African or Javan or Sumatran rhinos. In various old mughal miniature paintings rhino hunting by royals are featured and it clearly indicates its existence and attraction in north India. The majestic animal found reference in 16th century *Baburnama* where its presence is mentioned from Hindukush mountain is west to Indo-Myanmar border in east. Both Al Beruni and Ibn Batuta who travelled to India in Islamic age have given description of this animal in their respective travelogues.

However it was German painter Albrecht Duer (1471-1528) who made many a jaw fall in Europe when he, for the first time, published a sketch of this unique animal which was never seen in that continent.

Though rhinos rule every square mile of Pobitora they are not the only attraction of the forest. Many critically endangered and near threatened wild life, very peacefully co-exists here with 93 rhinos. Unbelievable fact is that 22 species of mammals, 27 species of reptiles, 80 species of butterflies, 9 species of amphibians and 8 species of turtles are often spotted here. The most worth mentioning will be bear, leopard, lesser cat, wild boar, Asiatic buffalo and barking deer.

For a bird lover it is a paradise. Thanks to the existence of vast water body inside of the sanctuary massive number of migrato-

ry birds are often found in Pobitora. More than 20000 birds of 214 specific species are found. Most surprising are cranes, Indian bustard, brown ducks and pink pelicans. Presence of small yet attractive birds are perched almost everywhere, even on the back of a moving rhino engrossed in grazing.

Thanks to forest department of Assam and local people, today Pobitora is an over populated sanctuary for rhinos. Many of them often come out of the forest area and create danger to villagers around. To prevent this, Assam Govt is now mobilizing few rhinos from here to other forests.

PICS : SOMEN SENGUPTA

Travel Logistics :

■ Pobitora is just 36 kms from Guwahati town and can be reached within 2 hours by car.

Guwahati is well connected with all major Indian cities. Ample accommodation available both in Govt and private hotels.

■ Useful website - www.assamtourism.gov.in & www.assamforest.in

Jeep safari is subject to minimum number of people and tickets to be taken before.

■ Extra money is charged for camera.

■ Rhinos are dangerous if irritated - So please be very careful with them.

■ Every jungle has its own rule - please cooperate with wildlife force.

■ No loud music inside the forest - keep your mobile silent.

■ No photography with flash - no selfie at all.

■ Elephant ride demands certain level of physical fitness.

