

in FOCUS

POOP TO PAPER

Where there's muck there's gold. **RHINO** dung can help conservation, says **Arundhati Nath**.

When greater one-horned rhinos and Asian elephants stray into the fringes of Assam's Kaziranga National Park and Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary, they often leave behind heaps of dung. Later, locals working for an ingenious company called Elrhino collect it and other forest waste with a mission to turn poop into paper.

Elrhino is the brainchild of Mahesh Chandra Bora, a retired mining engineer. After several experiments in blending rhino faeces with a kitchen blender, Mahesh felt it was feasible to produce dung paper on a larger scale and so he set up the company in 2014. His daughter Nisha Bora joined him in this offbeat venture.

Assam in north-east India is renowned for its one-horned rhinos and Asian elephants. Both species are being ruthlessly poached, for horns and tusks respectively. Only around 3,500 rhinos remain in the wild, with just two areas containing more than 100 individuals: Kaziranga (with 90 per cent of the population) and Chitwan National Park in Nepal. Between 2001 and 2016 at least 239 rhinos were killed in Assam, though Chitwan has lost only a single rhino to poachers in the past three years.

Helping conserve the rhinos and forests while employing and empowering the rural populace by producing 100 per cent biodegradable, tree-free paper is the dream that drives Mahesh and Nisha. "We want to stimulate talk about rhinos and elephants and raise support for them," Mahesh says. "The inclusion of dung and grass also gives a unique texture to our paper. Its intrinsic conservation value is part of its appeal too."

The company uses various complex procedures to turn dung, forest wastes, jute, water hyacinth, rags and pieces of traditional silks such as Muga and Eri into paper. It is then made into hand-crafted notebooks, lampshades, playing cards and bags. Given that rhinos can produce up to 20kg of dung a day, and elephants around 100kg, there's certainly no shortage of raw material.

● Arundhati Nath is a freelance writer based in Assam, India.

A paper company is using dung to connect the wellbeing of greater one-horned rhinos with the welfare of local communities, discouraging human-wildlife conflict.