

Media Mission for a Forest Minister



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Nava Thakuria 18 February 2008 20828 views

It may be vital for many to save the endangered rhinos in Assam's celebrated parks, but for a section of the media in the Northeast, it is seemingly more important to safeguard Assam's Forest Minister.

The rhino horn is prized as an aphrodisiac and a cure for many ills in traditional oriental medicine, selling for thousands of dollars per kilogram — hence the demand. Kaziranga National Park director Suren Buragohain argues all the time: "The poachers are equipped with sophisticated weapons. But our forest guards lack the proper arms to counter them". Incidentally, Buragohain earns brickbats from the

wildlife lovers as statistics reveal that during his term, Kaziranga has lost the highest number of rhinos in a decade.

As the director was clueless about the grave threats of rhino poaching in Kaziranga, the State Forest Minister showed an equally insensitive and callous approach to the issue, all the time preferring to ignore the matter. It finally compelled the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) to take up the cause. AASU activists staged demonstrations on February 2 in front of the forest offices in all parts of Assam to protest against the authority's "for failing to take adequate steps to stop this heinous crime against a national treasure".

Addressing the scribes at Guwahati Press Club on February 4, Soumyadeep Datta, director of Nature's Beckon, argued that the Forest Department of Assam had not preserved the rhino horns (with ivory and other wildlife organs) in their custody. Nature's Beckon received some vital information (regarding the number of rhino horns and other precious wildlife organs) from the Chief Conservator of Forest (Wildlife) of Assam after exercising the Right to Information Act, 2005. CCF (Wildlife) MC Malakar informed that only 1,498 horns were being preserved in the custody of the Forest Department till date, a claim many deem false. He revealed, "We have authentic information that till 1972, Assam's Forest Department used to sell the rhino horns. We suspect the department continued to sell rhino horns even after 1972, the year the Government of India prohibited hunting of wildlife and their trade by enacting laws."

Poaching is a punishable offence in India with seven years of imprisonment. India is a party to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) since 1976, and hence it is bound by efforts to eliminate international trade in wildlife and wildlife parts.

But the hue and cry of the concerned people of the region was not taken into consideration by a section of news agency reporters in Guwahati, who continued reporting the version of the Forest Minister. Taking his cue from the last incidence of rhino killing at Kaziranga on February 5, one senior reporter went to such extent of reporting where he described the Forest Minister as seeking a CBI enquiry into the matter. The New Delhi-based news agency, IANS, on February 5 (contributed by a Guwahati-based reporter), quoted Assam's Forest and Environment Minister Rockybul Hussain as saying: "We want a CBI to investigate the sudden increase in rhino poaching incidents at Kaziranga."

The question arises as to whether a journalist (or an agency) should ignore other developments in a particular situation, and whether a minister seeking an enquiry into the ministry under his charge does not point to his own incompetence. Surprisingly, the reporter missed these vital points and parroted the version of the Forest Minister, perhaps because of his ignorance. But, in reality, the minister expressed his version as "we have no reservation against a CBI enquiry into the matter of increasing cases of rhino poaching" in Kaziranga. Facing the heat, the Forest Minister also rushed to Kaziranga on February 6 to take stock of the situation.

A second story was differently headlined, but said the same thing. Neither reported what PTI did: "The All Assam Student's Union (AASU) on Saturday (February 2) staged a State-wide dharna to protest against the State Government's alleged failure in checking rhino killing by poachers in the Kaziranga National Park..." One of the stories carried by IANS never mentioned that actually an environment-centric NGO had demanded a CBI enquiry into the matter much earlier than the Forest Minister.

Likewise, the Guwahati-based reporter of AP tried to paint a rosy

picture of Rockybul Hussain, while narrating that the authorities at Kaziranga deployed 100 armed guards to check the poachers. He quoted the minister as saying: "We are alarmed at the seemingly organized poaching by gangs at the Kaziranga National Park." He also added in the February 6 news, "We have decided to rush 100 armed guards to Kaziranga and to equip the existing forest guards with 200 better rifles to match weapons used by the poachers." In reality, the news depicted the Forest Minister in such a way that nobody needs to worry about the poaching of rhinos when Rockybul Hussain is at the helm of forest affairs in Assam!

Amazingly, the news agency AP, based in New York, avoided the public fury against the Forest Department as well as the Forest Minister rather very shrewdly. As for the particular news item, released by AP and subscribed by a number of international media outlets, a serious reader may find it as a cleverly moulded piece by an experienced (and loyal) public relations official on behalf of his master! Well, if a journalist turns into a PR personnel in his approach, even a child in today's world can understand that it is not without personal gain or vested interest. A legitimate question that might arise here is whether a reporter has the right (under the Indian constitutional provision) to project a development with his own personal point of view that could even degrade the entire episode of saving the endangered rhinos just to safeguard Assam's Forest Minister.

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