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Can Assam's new BJP govt save the rhino?

Source : SIFY



Conservation is rarely an election issue in India. But in the recent Assam elections, all parties promised to stop poaching in Kaziranga if voted to power. Rhinos even found a mention in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's campaign speeches. Assam is famous for its rhinos and the state is home to about 65 per cent of the world's Greater One Horned Rhino population. But the animal is on the verge of extinction due to never ending incidents of poaching. More than 121 rhinos were killed for their horns in the state since 2011.

Rhino horns collected from Assam are illegally finding their ways to countries like China, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos and Korea for making traditional medicines. Rhino horns are sold in these countries at astronomical prices.

Sify.com's Surajit Talukdar speaks to Dr Bibhab Kumar Talukdar, a wildlife biologist, Asia Coordinator of International Rhino Foundation and CEO of non-governmental organization Aaranyak in Guwahati, on the state of the rhino in Assam. Dr Talukdar, an Ashoka Fellow, has also served as a member of the Standing Committee of National Board of Wildlife during 2008-2010.

Excerpts: Assam is world famous for its one-horned rhinos, but the poaching of these animals has been continuing in the state. How serious is the problem?

Poaching of any wildlife is demoralising. There is no doubt that poaching must be curbed. However, poaching is not the only threat that the government needs to be attentive about.

Invasive species reducing grassland habitat and the spread of diseases from domestic cattle to rhinos pose an even greater threat to long-term survival of rhinos in Assam.

How many rhinos were killed in the last five years in Assam? How many poachers were killed/arrested in the same period? Where was in the state the maximum rhino poaching taken place?

About 121-125 rhinos were killed in Assam during 2011-2015. Majority of them were in Kaziranga National Park. Kaziranga lost about 107 rhinos to poaching during 2011-2015, as per government records. Kaziranga is home to the largest population of Greater One Horned Rhino and it is obvious that poachers concentrate their efforts here. During the same period, about 30-40 poachers were killed in encounters by law enforcement agencies.

Why is the poaching of rhinos increasing in Assam? Are individual poachers involved or there any organized gangs? Are people living near national parks and sanctuaries and forest guards associated with rhino horn trade?

The demand of rhino horns in the illegal international markets of Asia is the main reason for the increase in rhino poaching not only in India, but also in African countries. Most rhino poachers and rhino horn traders are professionals and have good networks within and outside the country. Illegal wildlife trade is the third largest illegal trade after narcotics and arms smuggling. A few local people living near the rhino-inhabited areas in Assam may collaborate with poachers and anti-social elements. But, by and large, most local people support rhino conservation and they feel bad when a rhino is poached. However, a few of the forest staff in the state may get involved in wildlife crime because of their lust to get easy and extra money. So, the government must identify these bad elements working in the forest department or any other government agencies and punish them so that in future no forest or government staff shall dare to get involved in rhino poaching or illegal rhino horn trade.

Reports suggest that chopped off rhino horns are smuggled out of Assam to several Southeast Asian countries for use in the making of traditional medicines. Can you give us a picture of the illegal market of rhino horns?

It is well known that rhino horns are mainly used in Chinese traditional medicines. Besides China, rhino horns are also sold in Thailand, Vietnam, Laos and Korea. The modus operandi of wildlife smugglers are very professional and at par with narcotics and arms smugglers. The price of rhino horn varies from country to country. Market research done by various wildlife agencies found that a KG of rhino horn in end market is sold in between USD 20000 to USD 50000. However, these figures may be less as wildlife smugglers just to lure people spread such propaganda that rhino horn prices are very high so that they can trap more people in rhino-range countries to get involved in rhino poaching, followed by smuggling of rhino horns out of these rhino-range countries to end market.

How much big is this international rhino horn trade? Can you give us a broad picture?

Rhino horn trade is high on agenda of wildlife traders as wildlife trade is the third largest illegal trade in the world. The rhino horn trade in the past six years has increased many folds in Assam like some other countries of the world. South Africa, which was earlier very successful in protecting their rhinos, lost about 4510 rhinos since 2011. Currently in South Africa, about 20000 rhinos are found and the country is losing about 4% to 5% of their total population to poaching in the past 4 to 5 years. Compared to South Africa, Assam is doing a little better, although rhino poaching and rhinos poached since 2011 had increased in 2013 up to 41, but declined to 31 and 20 in 2014 and 2015 respectively. But the Assam Government and for that matter the Indian Government cannot afford to be complacent. The kind of rhino poaching pressure South Africa has faced in the past 5 to 6 years shifts to Assam and other rhino bearing areas in India. The Greater One Horned Rhino population, which is much smaller than African white or black rhinos, shall be pushed to the brink of extinction in no time. This is where I am worried. The increasing rhino poaching trend should be taken seriously by government and immediate proactive measures should be taken to curb it.

Why has the government so far failed to stop poaching of rhinos in Assam?

Failures and successes are part of any fight against illegal activities. Often failures are highlighted in media, while the successes are not often reflected. I think the greatest success of the Assam Government is the steady increase in rhino population from mere 20 or 30 in the beginning of 19th century to about 2650 rhinos currently. Due to increase in numbers of Greater One Horned Rhino in Assam and also in West Bengal and Nepal, the species has been down-listed from Endangered to Vulnerable by IUCN in 2008. Assam is home to about 65% of world's Greater One Horned Rhino population. The biggest failure of the Assam Government in rhino conservation is the failure to safeguard rhino population in Laokhowa Wildlife Sanctuary during 1980s and Manas National Park during 1990s due to socio-political unrests. We lost rhinos from the two rhino bearing areas. There is a link between socio-political unrest and increase/decrease in rhino poaching, which the government needs to analyse thoroughly to ensure that in the near future if any socio-political unrest takes place, efforts to save rhinos should be the top priority so that rhino population are not exterminated by poachers in such a situation. One of the greatest strengths in rhino conservation in Assam is the growing awareness and protective feeling amongst the common people of Assam. Without their support, rhinos would have become extinct long back.

Some media reports stated that many encounters of poachers done by forest guards, especially in Kaziranga National Park, are fake. What do you say on this issue?

Encounters take place between enforcement agencies and poachers. I think enforcement agencies are the right agency to comment on this aspect. One must realize that even hardcore criminals pretend to be innocent! So let law take its own course based on evidence.

Besides rhino poaching, are other types of wildlife crimes increasing in Assam and other parts of the Northeast?

There are illegal wildlife trade going on with species like tiger, leopard, clouded leopard for its skin and bones, bears for its bile, elephants for its ivory, Pangolin for its scales, snakes for its

skin, Musk deer for its musk and many more in Assam. Due to porous international border, Northeast India has become an important transit route for wildlife smugglers.

What does your experience say about the performance of other Southeast Asian nations in tackling wildlife crimes compared to India? Do you raise Assam's rhino poaching issue on international platforms?

With my past 27 years of involvement in wildlife conservation in India and Southeast Asian countries, Assam or Indian government is doing moderately good. For example, in Kaziranga National Park, the number of anti-poaching camps set up to protect rhinos and other wild animals are perhaps density wise highest in Asia. Rhino is a protection- dependent species due to poaching. As such government has to take cognizance of rhino poaching trends in Assam and initiate timely actions to stop incidents of poaching. Rhinos in the state have to be protected by local efforts rather than external efforts. If the government and the people of Assam keep their commitments, rhinos will survive in Assam in the years to come.

Do you think there is a possibility of the involvement of Northeast-based insurgent outfits in rhino horns smuggling?

There are reports in the past few years that some members of insurgent outfits are involved in rhino poaching. Both the Assam and Central Governments must investigate this issue seriously as rhino horn trade could increase flow of illegal arms to these outfits that could also jeopardize national security. Rhino poaching should not be treated as the problem of forest officials; it has to be looked into from a national security perspective.

How serious is the present Central Government in tackling wildlife crimes in Assam/Northeast?

The new Assam Government after assuming office last month has shown proactive mood to check rhino poaching, which is a good sign. Many ministers in this new Assam Government, including Forest Minister Pramila Rani Brahma, vowed to fight against rhino poachers.

What can the Assam and Central Governments do to save these rhinos from being poached?

Assam and Central Government can put more resources to strengthen intelligence gathering on poaching and illegal wildlife trade and book all culprits involved to ensure that all of them are convicted. Conviction is the key to check rhino poaching. Just mere arrest of poachers or wildlife smugglers may not check rhino poaching unless arrested poachers or wildlife smugglers are convicted. Fast track courts need to be established in Assam to deal with rhino poaching cases.

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