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Death on the Brahmaputra: The rhino, the rangers, and the usual suspects

by **Bikash Kumar Bhattacharya** on 28 August 2019

- *In February 2018, a greater one-horned rhino wandered from India's Orang National Park into the nearby Burachapori-Laokhowa Wildlife Sanctuary.*
- *In September 2018, officials lost track of the rhino. In June 2019, the rhino's buried remains, and a bullet, were discovered close to a guard camp in Burachapori-Laokhowa.*
- *Officials in Burachapori-Laokhowa did not officially report the rhino missing until the matter was leaked to the press more than a month later.*
- *Suspicion has been cast, variously, on forest staff, illegal settlers and illegal fishers.*

ASSAM, India — On Feb. 5, 2018, rangers at Orang National Park in the northeast Indian state of Assam received multiple phone calls from villagers reporting sightings of a stray rhino.

Dawdling and lounging on one of the numerous islands in the Brahmaputra River, the rhino had traveled about 10 kilometers (6 miles) from the safety of the park, which harbors 102 greater one-horned rhinoceroses (*Rhinoceros unicornis*).

It isn't uncommon for rhinos to stray out of the protected habitats in Assam. A [study](#) in one sanctuary, Pobitora, found that as many as 40 percent of the rhinos there wandered in and out of the sanctuary's borders on a daily basis. Monitoring these animals, and if necessary corralling them back to safety, is a regular part of the state forest department's job.

This particular case, however, would come to a bad end for both the rhino and the wildlife department. Eight months after the rhino first wandered out of Orang, rangers completely lost track of her — a lapse forest officials only publicly acknowledged after it was leaked to the media. She wasn't seen again until June 2019, when her skeleton was unearthed in the vicinity of a forest guard encampment, leaving forest officials facing uncomfortable questions about what exactly happened to the animal, and why officials had suppressed and distorted information about her disappearance.



A group of forest officials including Kaziranga National Park director P Shivkumar (second from left), Orang National Park administrator Ramesh Kumar Gogoi (third from left) and honorary wildlife warden Saurav Borkataky (fourth from left), were part of the vigil on the wandering rhino on the night 6 Feb, 2018. Image courtesy of Saurav Borkataky.

A wandering rhino

It all started ordinarily enough, recalls Ramesh Kumar Gogoi, the divisional forest officer of Mangaldai wildlife division and administrator of Orang National Park. Just past noon on Feb. 5, 2018, his office began fielding calls about a stray rhino from villagers near Singri, a cluster of picturesque hills squatting by the Brahmaputra River. Gogoi and his team leapt into action, he says: There had been several previous cases of rhinos being poached when they strayed out of the park to the *char*, or islands and sandbars, which dot the river, so they immediately rushed to try to bring the animal back to the park.

Their attempts proved futile. For three days the rhino, a female sub-adult, moved from one char to another along the Brahmaputra. Finally, on Feb. 8, she made her

way to the relative safety of another protected area, Burachapori-Laokhowa Wildlife Sanctuary, which sits on the river's southern bank.

"It was quite a spectacle," Gogoi says. "Thousands of villagers gathered to see the rhino as she wandered in these char areas."

An [ideal rhino habitat](#), Burachapori-Laokhowa WLS in the early 1980s harbored more than 70 rhinos, but all were wiped out by poachers during the political unrest of the Assam Agitation. In 2016, two rhinos, a mother and her daughter, were translocated to the sanctuary from Kaziranga National Park as part of the [Indian Rhino Vision 2020 \(IRV 2020\)](#) program, but both animals died within months, reportedly due to natural causes.

So the newly arrived rhino became the sole, unchallenged representative of her tribe in Burachapori-Laokhowa.

And she thrived.

"The rhino was observed to be in a great health and was often seen wallowing in the marshes and pits that dot the Burachapori-Laokhowa landscape," says Samarjit Ojah, a private citizen committed to conservation appointed by the government as an honorary wildlife warden of the Assam state forest department.

Nearly eight months after her arrival in Burachapori-Laokhowa, the rhino disappeared.

From that point forward, the official record of the rhino is scant. On the night of Sept. 24, she was seen trying to move outside of the sanctuary, according to an official report filed Nov. 3, 2018. The report, seen by Mongabay, notes that forest guards managed to keep her inside the sanctuary that night, but never saw her again and had no clues as to her whereabouts.

Five days after that report was filed — roughly six weeks after the last known sighting of the rhino — sanctuary authorities officially informed their colleagues and superiors that the rhino was gone. On Nov. 8, Jitendra Kumar, then the divisional forest officer of Nagaon wildlife division, under whose jurisdiction Burachapori-Laokhowa sanctuary falls, sent a letter to Assam's principal chief conservator of forests for wildlife, the chief wildlife warden, and the Orang park authorities. Kumar wrote that sanctuary officials had on Oct. 26 spotted "approximately 20 to 25 days older footprints" of the rhino on a char called Daora Tapu. The island is along the same route the rhino had followed when traveling out of Orang National Park. On the basis of these footprints, Kumar concluded that the rhino had crossed the Brahmaputra and returned to Orang, her former home.

However, Orang authorities said they had no reason to believe the rhino had, in fact, returned. Divisional forest officer Gogoi, in his official response to Kumar's report, wrote that his office "had no information or evidence of the re-entry of the rhino in Orang National Park." In the letter, he noted that when the rhino strayed out of Orang in February 2018, it generated so much attention that a magistrate had to be brought in to control the rowdy crowds that gathered to see it. By contrast, during the animal's supposed return to Orang along the same route, there wasn't a single eyewitness, or any other signs of the rhino's passage apart from a single set of footprints allegedly found by Burachapori-Laokhowa officials.

Nonetheless, the official theory put forth by wildlife officials held that the rhino was safely back in Orang.

This explanation was upended on June 24, 2019, when the rhino's buried remains were unearthed, along with a bullet. Acting on a tip, India's wildlife crime investigating agency, the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau ([WCCB](#)), along with officials from the Nagaon wildlife division and Orang National Park, located the burial site inside Burachapori-Laokhowa WLS, near the Polashtoli forest guard camp.

"It's clear that the rhino fell victim to poachers as we recovered a used bullet near the skeletal remains. The footprints mentioned in my predecessor Kumar's report must have been old footprints or that of another rhino," says Ranjith Ram, the current divisional forest officer at Nagaon wildlife division.

Poaching remains the biggest threat to rhinos in India: Kaziranga National Park, which hosts two-thirds of the greater one-horned rhinos left on Earth, saw [nearly 100 rhinos poached](#) from 2013 to 2018. And the present case is by no means the first time a rhino was shot very close to a guard post. In 2015, for example, a rhino was shot and buried close to a guard camp in Kaziranga National Park, an incident that [resulted in the arrest](#) of four forest guards.



The rhino in question. After wandering out of Orang National Park, this female sub-adult eventually met her demise in the Burachapori-Laokhowa wildlife sanctuary. Image courtesy of Saurav Borkataky.

The disappearance of the rhino was hushed up

That the rhino was poached close to a forest guard camp was not the only fact that reflected poorly on the forest department. There were other aspects too, including tardy and inconsistent reporting.

The last confirmed sighting of the rhino was on the night of Sept. 24, 2018, but news of the rhino's disappearance was kept quiet for more than a month until the matter was leaked to the press. On Oct. 27, 2018, the popular Assamese-language daily *Dainik Agradoot* ran an article, citing anonymous sources, reporting that the sole rhino in Burachapori-Laokhowa had gone missing and that forest officials in the sanctuary were keeping the matter under wraps.

According to Arup Kalita, the journalist who wrote the article, the information came from a whistle-blower within the forest department who insisted his identity be protected. "Once the news was out, the Burachapori-Laokhowa authorities ringed me up informing that they have been conducting intensive search operations to track down the rhino," Kalita told Mongabay. "Four days later, on October 31, they

informed me that they had been able to locate footprints of the rhino on a char close to Orang National Park and the rhino had safely returned to its former home.”

Kalita filed a story for the same newspaper on Nov. 1, 2018, reporting the development. “In my mind, however, I was suspicious,” he says. “Was it a mere coincidence that they’d found the elusive rhino’s footprints immediately after the story was out?”

The publication of the articles in the local media was followed by an apparent flurry of activity in late October. But it was only on Nov. 8 that Kumar, the divisional forest officer in charge of Burachapori-Laokhowa, sent his official letter informing Assam’s principal chief conservator of forests and the authorities at Orang National Park that they’d lost track of the animal.

Not only did this letter come after the *Dainik Agradoot* articles brought the matter to public attention, it also came 13 days after forest officials said they had found rhino footprints on a river island near Orang — thereby causing the loss of crucial time for Orang authorities to check whether animal had really returned to the park.

“Had they been serious, they’d have immediately informed the Orang authorities,” says Saurav Borkataky, an honorary wildlife warden of the Assam state forest department at Tezpur. “The apparently deliberate delay in reporting raises questions on the roles of the forest officials in Burachapori-Laokhowa,” adds Borkataky, who was part of the team keeping constant vigil on the rhino when she first strayed out of Orang National Park in February 2018.

When local media revealed that the rhino’s disappearance had gone unreported for more than a month, and later that her skeletal remains were found close to a forest guard camp, it raised [suspicion in some quarters](#) that officials may have somehow been complicit in the rhino’s death.

“Why would they hush up the matter for so long if they’ve no hidden interest in it?” asks Tezpur-based environmental activist Dilip Nath.

Though it may sound like speculation, concern about forest officials’ involvement in wildlife crime has been echoed by no less than the office of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. A [recently released report](#) on the management of India’s tiger reserves put a spotlight on an alleged forest official-rhino poacher nexus in Kaziranga National Park, which is also a tiger reserve. “The poaching of three rhinos on 2 and 4 November 2017 took place in the night, barely 200 m from Tunikati anti-poaching camp, in Burhapahar range, Kaziranga Tiger Reserve,” notes the report, prepared by the Wildlife Institute of India and the National Tiger Conservation Authority on behalf of the government and released by Modi on July 29. It notes that with 178 anti-poaching camps in a 911-square-kilometer (352-square-mile) reserve, each post is responsible for patrolling just 5 square kilometers (1.9 square miles).

“Given the resources at the command of the personnel it should not be difficult to guard the area effectively,” the report reads. “Such poaching so close to the camp leads to a suspicion of the involvement of officials.”

There have also been previous instances where forest guards faced charges in cases of rhino poaching. In addition to the 2015 case that saw four current or former forest guards [arrested in Kaziranga](#), a forest guard in Orang National Park was arrested in 2015 for his alleged involvement in a rhino poaching incident, though he was later acquitted.

Even high-ranking officials such as divisional forest officers have been convicted of wildlife crimes and corruption. In 2016, [police seized](#) illegally hoarded tiger skin, deer skin, ivory and other wildlife products in the house of a divisional forest officer who had been caught accepting bribes.



One-horned rhinos roaming in Kaziranga National Park. Photo by Udayan Dasgupta for Mongabay.

A controversial photograph and other inconsistencies

The location of the rhino's body and the tardy reporting by Burachapori-Laokhowa WLS are not the only red flags critics point to.

Many are skeptical about the authenticity of the rhino footprints the Burachapori-Laokhowa officials claimed to have spotted on the char close to Orang National Park. The report submitted by Kumar says the footprints were 20 to 25 days old

when they were spotted on Oct. 26, 2018. But is it really possible that rhino footprints can remain intact for that long on the loose, sandy soil of a char during the month of October, which sees considerable rainfall in Assam? “Usually, it’s very unlikely. A single strong downpour washes away the surface soil on these char islands,” says honorary warden Borkataky.

More questions have been raised by a photograph included with Kumar’s report as evidence that a team of forest officials and civil administrators verified the footprints two days after they were first found.

The report states that “on 28/10/18 K.S. Dekaraja, AFS ACF, Sri Samarjit Ojha (honorary wildlife warden) along with Shri K Sharma, ACS, ADC, Circle Officer, Tezpur visited the same area and confirmed the same.” While there is no mention of the photograph in the report itself, it was obtained by activist Dilip Nath through India’s Right to Information Act.

Although Shri K. Sharma is named in the report as a witness, he does not actually appear in the group photograph. Instead, a different person with the exact same title—“ACS, ADC, Sonitpur” (meaning Assam Civil Service, Assistant District Commissioner, Sonitpur) can be seen, namely Nabajyoti Ojha.

When Mongabay spoke to K. Sharma, named in the report as having verified the rhino footprints, he denied visiting the spot, or having any knowledge of the incident.

Honorary wildlife warden Sri Samarjit Ojah, who does appear in the photo and was part of the team, says they were in the area on Oct. 28 for a land survey that was in no way connected to the search for the missing rhino. According to Ojah, Ali Hussain (who also appears in the photo), the Burachapori Laokhowa forest official who according to Kumar’s report had spotted the footprints two days before, was accompanying the team and insisted they also visit the spot where the rhino footprints were found. “The photograph taken on the spot was just a personal memento and not meant to be used as an evidence for an official report,” Ojah says.

Nabajyoti Ojha, currently an administrator in Mangaldai district (who appears in the photograph but is not mentioned in the report), also told Mongabay he was unaware that the photograph was being used by Kumar as official evidence. Like Samarjit, he said the purpose of their visit was a land survey unconnected to the case of the missing rhino.

Both told Mongabay that they were in no position to verify and “confirm” that those were rhino footprints. “I’m neither an Asian rhino expert, nor a forest official. How would I verify rhino footmarks?” Ojha asks.

Moreover, in the official letter Kumar sent on Nov. 8 to his superiors informing them about the rhino’s disappearance and possible return to Orang, the date on which the

pachyderm went missing was stated as “25/11/2018” — 17 days into the future. While this appears to be a clerical error and can be discounted as a mistake, activist Nath says, “Coming from a senior forest official this demonstrates a lack of care and seriousness towards the matter, if not anything else.”

Jitendra Kumar, currently a divisional forest officer at Guwahati Wildlife Division, did not respond to multiple requests for comment by phone and in writing.



Orang National Park, located in northern Assam is home to around 100 rhinos. Until the wandering rhino’s remains were unearthed, the official theory held that she had made her way back to her original home in Orang. Image by Bikash Kumar Bhattacharya for Mongabay.

More theories about the rhino’s death

Forest officials are not the only group being viewed with suspicion after the discovery of the rhino’s remains. There are two additional theories afloat: One implicates illegal settlers, and the other illegal fishermen operating inside the sanctuary.

Since the 1950s, Assam has lost [4,270 square kilometers](#) (1,822 square miles) of land to erosion, more than 7 percent of the state's total area. This partially explains why more than [22 percent](#) of the state's forest areas are under encroachment.

In the Burachapori-Laokhowa sanctuary, some [32.5 square kilometers](#) (12.5 square miles) are under encroachment. Most of these encroachers are flood refugees, former char dwellers ravaged by flood, says Abu Bakkar Siddique, who lives in Juria Kaliadinga, a village on the fringes of the sanctuary. "The mighty Brahmaputra erodes away massive tracts of land and submerges numerous char islands every year, as well as creating some new sandbars along its course. Many of these people rendered landless by erosion have encroached upon forestland."

Both the authorities and the settlers recognize that there are illegal settlements, says Siddique. "However, as the government has failed to rehabilitate these flood-ravaged people, there is a tacit understanding: the settlers will be allowed to continue to live in the area they're occupying as the land has already converted into agricultural fields and there's no forest cover on it, but there should be no further encroachment. And the people respected it."

When Jitendra Kumar took charge of the sanctuary as a divisional forest officer, he said he had "plans to reclaim and reforest these encroached lands" and gave the go-ahead for an eviction drive in January this year. The move led to a standoff between the forest officers and the illegal settlers, with the latter [attacking Kumar](#) and other forest officials.

Because Kumar initiated the eviction drive, strong resentment brewed against him among illegal encroachers, says Ali Hussain, the Burachapori-Laokhowa forest staffer who supposedly spotted the footprints of the missing rhino. "Therefore, some angry settlers, with the help of hired guns, may have conspired in killing the rhino near a forest camp to smear Kumar and the forest department."

However, Siddique and other villagers in encroached settlements Mongabay spoke with denied this allegation as "an utter nonsense and entirely baseless."

The [other theory](#) points to the illegal fishermen operating inside the sanctuary.

Dilwar Hussain, a member of the local conservation nonprofit Laokhowa Burachapori Biodiversity Conservation Society, says there has been rampant illegal fishing in the numerous *beels*, or water bodies, inside the sanctuary. "Before the Burachapori-Laokhowa forest was accorded the status of a WLS in 1995, the government used to sell fishing licenses to fish in the waterbodies. However, it became illegal after the forest was accorded protected status. But fishing in the sanctuary's numerous waterbodies never really ceased," says Hussain, whose own father once held a license to fish in Burachapori-Laokhowa.

Fishing in and around the protected area is a vital source of livelihood for a huge number of people near the wildlife sanctuary, says Siddique. “There are two types of fisher: small, subsistence fishers and commercial fishers who go for relatively big-scale fishing. While the authorities generally don’t take much issue with the first type, they remain vigilant on the second type. When the rhino arrived in the area, it was the commercial fishers whose activities were perturbed and came to a halt. Therefore, some forest officials are propounding the theory that some of these fishermen might have ganged up with poachers to weed out the obstacle — the rhino.”



In this 2016 image, forest officials are seen seizing fishing nets and equipment in Roumari beel inside Burachapori-Laokhowa WLS. Image courtesy of Laokhowa Burhachapori Conservation Society.

Ongoing investigation

Amid this speculation, the Assam state forest department and the WCCB are conducting a joint investigation into the rhino's disappearance and subsequent death. Mongabay has learned that so far investigators have identified three figures of interest, all from the nearby village of Phutaljar. Investigators, who are now questioning them, refuse to divulge further information about the case, but local sources allege the three men have records of involvement in past wildlife crimes, including illegal fishing inside the sanctuary.

Meanwhile, wildlife activists and residents Mongabay spoke to demand what they call "a free and fair investigation" into the actions of the forest officials.

Without a transparent and impartial investigation, honorary wildlife warden Borkataky and activist Nath say they fear the entire episode could inflame existing tensions between residents and forest officials. Historically, people on the fringes of what is now the Burachapori-Laokhowa sanctuary depended heavily on fishing in local beels. Losing access to these bodies of water and other resources that now fall within the protected area put already impoverished people under further strain, and led to widespread resentment.

On top of that, public distrust of forest officials is widespread in Assam. High-profile cases of corruption among rangers and forest officials are well known among the locals.

An investigation that appears to probe only local groups like fishers and settlers while ignoring the possibility of official corruption could deepen this distrust and aggravate community-conservation conflict, they say. "Therefore, the matter needs to be handled cautiously so that those who are responsible for the rhino's death are brought to book and at the same time the community relations aren't negatively affected," Borkataky says.

"A single blot can overshadow the unrelenting hard work of hundreds of rangers working day in and day out to protect the rhino in the state's four protected rhino habitats," Nath says. "That's why we are demanding a fair investigation that is unencumbered by the baggage of politics."