

A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE HUMAN- ELEPHANT RELATIONSHIP IN ASSAM: FROM ANCIENT TIMES TO THE CONTEMPORARY PERIOD

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Abstract

Elephants have been found in abundance in north-east India with many ancient sources referring to the procurement of elephants from this area. The trend of elephants being used by royalty mostly for war purposes was carried forward to the medieval period. After the arrival of the British, the utility of elephants shifted from war to timber as carriers but their importance remained undiminished. This paper explores the relationship between humans and elephants in Assam from the ancient to the colonial periods and the human-elephant conflict that plagues many areas of Assam in contemporary times.

Keywords: Assam, human-elephant, history, colonial rule, Ahoms, ancient Assam

Introduction

The northeast of India has been known for its elephants since ancient times. Ancient epics like the *Mahābhārata* mention Prāggyotishpur and its kings and their wealth in elephants. During the medieval period, the Mughals were fascinated by the technique of using elephants in war by Ahom kings and tried to barter with the Ahom and other regional rulers for procuring such elephants. The colonial period also saw the use of elephants, although the purpose had changed from war to commercial use. The British also tried to implement different strategies for the control and systematization of the process

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of capturing elephants and to increase their utility. However, there was and is another side to the elephant story of Assam. The British recorded the conflict that was brewing between the elephants and humans and the destruction of lives and property that accompanied the conflict. This conflict has become more frequent in the present context because of rising cases of man-elephant conflict where many innocent lives have been lost. The loss of habitat of the elephant which is a result of the encroachment of forest areas and elephant corridors by humans has resulted in direct contact between humans and elephants which results in violent clashes where both elephants and humans lose their lives.

The loss of habitat of the elephants also results in their raids in search of food, which manifests as crop raiding and it leaves many farmers devastated. A number of agencies have come up with temporary solutions to the problem but it still persists and there is the need to find long-term solutions. Elephants of the northeast have a special place in history right from ancient times which continued to the colonial period. While looking for present solutions to the problem, it is also important to be aware of the rich history that our ancestors have left behind about elephants and the relationship between humans and elephants. Awareness about the history of human-elephant relationships helps to build a better mindset towards the species and will help in adopting a more humane and historically conscious approach towards the problem being faced by many in the present context.

Objectives of the Study

To make a historical inquiry into the human-elephant relationship that prevailed in Assam in the ancient period.

- To explore the history of the human-elephant relationship in the medieval period.
- To look into the attitudes of the colonizers towards the elephants during the colonial period and the scenario in contemporary times.

Methodology

This paper makes use of both primary and secondary sources to glean facts about the human-elephant relationship in Assam during the ancient, medieval, and modern periods. Colonial records have been extensively referred to in order to reconstruct the history of elephant use during the colonial period.

History of the use of elephants in India from the ancient period

From the ancient period onwards, the utility of elephants saw a change from being used as war elephants to being used as timber carriers.

According to Trautmann, the idea of the war elephant was conceptualised in India, and the techniques of capturing wild elephants and training them for warfare were created here. The script of the Indus Valley civilization is yet to be deciphered which limits our understanding of the king-elephant relationship during that period; however, fifty-seven images of elephants were found in a corpus of over four thousand inscribed seals and copper tablets. A few clay toy elephants have also been found (88). On the question of whether elephants were domesticated during the Indus Valley civilization, Trautmann looks at evidence like the manger which is placed before elephants in some seals, the representation of a vertical fold or line at the shoulder interpreted as harness or blanket, and decorative painting on terracotta toy elephants (91). However, there is the complete absence of *aṅkuśa* (the main tool for managing an elephant; a sharpened goad with a pointed hook) and mahout (rider of the elephant). He concludes that Indus people may have captured wild elephants but there is a lack of conclusive evidence.

In the later age, the later Vedic period saw the entry of the war elephant, with no evidence suggesting that elephants were used in war during the Ṛgvedic period. The Aitareya Brahmana records the gift of 1000 elephants and other luxuries by King Anga to a priest who performed AindraMahābhīṣeka. He argues that the elephant riders mentioned in the *Mahābhārata* all belong to some specific regions including the northeast, Central India, or the South (Trautmann 101-103).

During the ancient period, the peak age of elephants used in war was thought to be 40 or 60; however, 20 was the age when they were deemed fit to work. War elephants were captured as adults in the wild and then trained. Hence, kings were interested in protecting the forests and the elephants. Taming and using elephants needed a large staff and practical knowledge and skills. Sanskrit texts that talk about elephants include the *Arthaśāstra* of Kautilya, the *Gajaśāstra* of Palkapya, the *Gajaśikṣā* of Narada, the *Gajagrahanaprakara* of Narayana Diksita, the *Matangalīla* of Nilakantha and the *Hastiyāurveda* of Palkapya (Trautmann 145). Sukumara Barkath wrote the *Hastividyārnava* in Assamese prose around 1734 CE when the use of elephants in war was slowly starting to die out. The *Ain-i-Akbari* also mentions elephants. It records that Akbar took pleasure

in mounting elephants, even when they were in musth (in heat) which is very dangerous.

Elephants in the History of Assam

During the ancient period, elephant squadrons or *gajabala* formed an important department of the Kamarupa army, according to the findings of B.K. Barua. The epic *Mahābhārata* mentions Bhagadatta who fought bravely in the war in Kurukshetra with his elephant force. The king, Bhaskarvarman also maintained a department of elephants in his army as is evidenced by the Nidhanpur Grants. According to Hieun Tsang, a Buddhist traveller who visited India in the 7th century CE, the army of Bhaskarvarman had 20000 elephants.

The physical and climatic conditions of Assam were conducive to elephant breeding right from the ancient period. The importance of elephants can also be judged by the fact that a whole document dedicated to the intricacies of elephant capturing and breeding had been written. The *Hastividyārnava* was compiled by Sukumar Barkath with Dilbar and Dosai, two Muslim artists and it is a comprehensive document that records various knowledge systems about the elephants and suggests medical relief for any ailments suffered by the species. The book was prepared under the patronage of Queen Ambika during the reign of Ahom Swargadeo Siva Singha of Assam. Shihabuddin Talish mentions the existence of elephants as an important department in the Ahom army in the 17th century when he accompanied Mir Jumla (1662 CE). Wild elephants were caught with a noose and it was turned into a sport. Two processes through which capturing of elephants was done were the *kheddah* (a stockade trap to capture an entire herd) and *mela* (lassoing a wild elephant from the back of a trained one) operations which are mentioned by Mirza Nathan in *Baharistan-i-Ghaibi*. The Ahom King Pratap Singha (1603-1641) built Hati-Garh (literally meaning 'fort for confining elephants' (Ahmed 264-270).

After the advent of the British, a systematic approach to capturing wild elephants was undertaken. The colonial government created the *Kheddah* department in order to capture elephants (Singh 759-765). The colonizers perceived elephant hunting as a sport that surpassed the excitement of hunting tigers. Elephants remained a vital component of the British army even after the invention of the modern artillery. The *Kheddah* department was granted permission by the British government to hunt elephants in the middle of the 1800s. Earlier, the capturing of elephants was done by private

contractors. In 1875, Sanderson was made the superintendent of Dacca Kheddah. The kheddah operations led to a decline in the population of elephants and a reduction in their habitat. The Elephant Preservation Act IV was passed in 1879 (Nongbri 3189-3199). McCosh in his *Topography of Assam* writes about the hunting techniques of the Singphos who hunted elephants for ivory. According to him, they used poisoned arrows. One of the best areas for elephant hunting was said to be the Garo Hills.

McCosh also writes about the fierce character of wild elephants that entered the villages in broad daylight and plundered granaries and also destroyed crops. He writes that a great number of elephants were caught and exported to other countries every season from Assam. They were caught using female elephants called Koonkis. "The females are driven into the haunts of the wild ones, where they are joined by wild males. In the course of the courtship the Mahouts so contrive to shackle the unsuspecting gallants to some convenient tree, that they are fixed to the spot immovably, and thus are allowed to remain till confinement and want of food render them easily tameable" (McCosh 44). According to his account, Assamese elephants were shipped for an average of 300 rupees, numbering between 700 and 1000. The number of humans killed by wild elephants in 1833 was 17 and in 1834 it was also 17. (McCosh 129)

Elephants are mentioned as a commercial staple in the *Physical and Political Geography of the province of Assam* (43). The report records "These valuable animals abound in the forests of the Assam Valley, on the lower slopes of the Assam Range, in South Cachar and South Eastern Sylhet." The kheddah establishment which was founded by the colonial government in Dacca conducted annual hunts in the forests of the Garo Hills. On the other hand, the privilege to hunt elephants in designated areas known as elephant mahals was auctioned off to the highest bidder during the times when the government kheddah were not operational. The lessee had to pay a tax of Rs 100 on each animal captured. Two hundred and fifty-nine elephants were captured in 1890-92, sixty-six elephants were captured in 1891-92 while one hundred and three elephants were captured by these lessees in 1892-93.

Human-Elephant relationship in the contemporary period

The relationship between humans and elephants has taken a new turn in the post-independence period. Although instances of human-elephant conflict have also been found from the colonial period,

however, it has become a serious issue in present times. According to a newspaper report, over 70 humans and 80 elephants die annually in Assam due to human-elephant conflict (March 16, 2023, *Deccan Herald*). An article in *Earth Journalism* reported that there were at least 875 people killed by elephants in the ten years from 2010 to 2020. 825 elephants also lost their lives during the same period. The human-elephant conflict in Assam has become a serious problem in recent years with stories of death and destruction of families, their homes and crops becoming a regular feature of everyday news. Majority of the incidents happen in the four districts of Sonitpur, Golaghat, Goalpara, and Udalguri.

Numerous attempts have been made to find a long-term solution to the problem of human-elephant conflict in Assam. The Assam Haathi Project tries to solve the problem using community-based elephant monitoring whereby community members receive training on how to document conflict events and track down elephant movements. However, these attempts are not without limitations (Zimmermann 35). Individual efforts have also been made by people like Parbati Barua, popularly known as the 'Elephant Girl' of Assam who has been recently awarded the Padma Shri by the President of India for her pioneering efforts in elephant conservation and wildlife management. She is India's first female elephant mahout. She has trained more than five hundred elephants using age-old methods like the Mela Shikar which captures wild elephants without the need for tranquilizers (<https://pib.gov.in/>).

Findings

The paper focused on the human-elephant relationship that had prevailed in Assam from the ancient period onwards. The major finding of the study revolves around the changing forms of the relationship between humans and elephants. Elephants played a significant role in the royal army of the Ahom kings and the trend of the war elephants continued. The Ahom and the Koch kings used the elephants to their advantage in wars against the Mughals. The Mughals also coveted the mighty elephants of Assam and occasionally they tried to bargain with the kings of Assam and took away elephants to be made a part of the royal army. The idea of using elephants in battle was abandoned with the arrival of the British since the animals were increasingly being employed for other tasks, such as delivering timber. The British needed timber for the construction of railways as well as ships and they found elephants to carry the timber in the

North-East. In the contemporary period, the problem of conflict has plagued many of the inhabitants of the region with a number of people losing their lives in the process.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study is to chronicle the evolution of human-elephant partnerships from the ancient period till the present context in Assam. In conclusion, it can be said that Assam had a rich history of relationship with elephants because the elephants had constituted an important part of governance right from the ancient period. The elephants of Assam also find mention in epics like the *Mahābhārata* and many travellers who visited Assam in the ancient and medieval period never failed to mention elephants and their prowess. The traditional knowledge about elephants has been recorded in the *Hastividyārnava* which provides rich details about the elephants of Assam. Further research can be carried out on the elephants through a thorough study of the text. The colonial period saw the transformation of the utility of elephants from being used in war, to being used for commercial purposes.

As the British started exercising more and more power over the north-east, they began to introduce new mechanisms of control. These were implemented in almost every sphere of economic activity which the British thought would be profitable to them. Hence, the Department of Elephants was also monopolized by the British. With the creation of the Kheddah department, the colonial authority also gained control of the technique of capturing wild elephants, and the entire procedure was made marketable by offering it up for auction. The British sold the right to catch elephants at auction in addition to selling the land to the highest bidder. They were impressed with the utility of the elephants of the northeast which is recorded in almost all colonial records pertaining to that period.

In the present context, the instances of human-elephant conflicts have been posing great problems for the people of Assam. Many have suffered the loss of lives as well as property. Crop damages are a recurring instance where elephants raid the crops of the farmers during the harvest season. There are frequent reports of the destruction of houses. The violence is not one-sided and in this conflict many elephants have also lost their lives.

This paper has tried to make a historical study of the relationship between humans and elephants in the history of Assam in order to offer a better perspective to those who are seeking solutions to the

problem. A historical understanding of the relationship is important to be able to situate the present problem in a definite context and the paper is an attempt towards this purpose.

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