Tradition of Domesticating Elephants and its Inherent Association with the Folklore of Assamese Society

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Elephants have always appealed to the people of all ages, being the largest living land mammal. They also serve as an umbrella species, as the conservation of elephants can protect huge tracts of habitats and various other species that live in it. They are not just important as another animal on the planet but have equally participated in the development of human culture. Hence the respect for them is on a different level compared to others.

Both humans and elephants have enjoyed a close relationship which dates back to prehistoric times. When we talk about Assam, a home for nearly 5620 elephants (according to 2011 census), it is a significant area for conservation of these mega-herbivores. In this region, elephant is a key object in the folklore of Assamese society more so as it was perceived to be a status symbol. Once the rich and famous could afford to keep and maintain an elephant. Understanding a large animal in a cultural medley is always an area of interest, and my search intensified for its tradition and links with Assamese society. It also holds a high place in the religious circles as myth logically an elephant's head was used to bring back God Ganesha to life.

Human-Elephants interaction

About one-fifth of the known world population of Asian elephants is found in the north-eastern part of India. The most recent census of the elephant population in the north-east region of India (1993, 1997, 2002, 2008 and 2011) indicate that Assam has the largest number of these animals followed by Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya. Literary sources describes that the economic importance of elephants increased significantly from the medieval period. Assam had a very specific social relationship with the elephants for a long time. Ahoms and their previous rulers also made elephant an indivisible part of royal tradition.

During the Ahom rule, ivory articles constituted a major portion of royal gifts. The most important vernacular source that we consulted in order to understand the age-old traditions of elephant management in Assamese social history was the *Hastividyarnava* of *Sukumar Barkaith.* is one of the best known illustrated manuscripts of Assam. Commissioned under the patronage of King Siva Singha (1713-1744 AD) and his Queen Phuleswari, it deals with the management and care of elephants in the royal stables. The *Hastividyarnava* is a work that arose in a matrix of disciplined study, prolonged

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[1] Ward place, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

observation and a precedent tradition, and the commission of such a treatise was perhaps considered important as the elephant played an important role in affirming the idea of monarchy and exercising state power.[2]. The descriptions of individual characteristics, morphology, and behavior patterns of different types of elephants, and accounts of their geographical distribution, are of great interest. The treatise itself was written for a ruling monarch, and almost entirely from the view of sustaining monarchy – which elephants are suitable for the kingdom, how they should be trained for use by the nobility and for the purpose of war. The *Hastividyarnava* has an elaborate taxonomic system describing the various types of elephants and their character, and it was perhaps considered important for a king to have knowledge regarding elephants, as it is mentioned that only the learned king recognizes particular breeds.

The two artists *Dilbar* and *Dosai* who painted the manuscript were probably not very familiar with the landscape of Assam and hence the quality of the landscapes is not of a very high standard.

The manuscript is currently housed in the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies (DHAS) in Guwahati, Assam.

Even the British spotted the use and revenue potential of the elephant.

Elephants were used extensively both during war and in peace time for the state making progress. British had taken up the social and political benefits of the elephant ownership and established a separate department to manage the elephants known as *kheddah*. *A. J. W. Milroy, a British official* described methods like *Mela shikar* and *Kheddah shikar* that were well practiced in Assamese society in his writings.

According to a folk belief in Assam, elephant is considered to be the representative of 'Burha Dangoria', a kind of gentle spirit (god) who does not inflict harm to the people in general. He does harm only when he is enraged by the activities of the people. People still in the villages of Assam worship the elephant with great devotion.

Region	State	Number	Total for region
North-eastern	Assam	5 312	9 475- 9 511
	Arunachal Pradesh	2 102	
	Meghalaya	1 840	
	Nagaland	147	
	Tripura	60-85	
	Manipur	10-15	
	Mizoram	4-10	

Table: Wild elephants in Northeast India (2000)

Region	State	Number	Total for region
North-eastern	Assam	1 253-1 290	1 903-1 970
	Arunachal Pradesh	564-580	
	Meghalaya	45-54	
	Nagaland	6	
	Tripura	35-40	

Table 2 Domesticated elephants in Northeast India (2000)

Methods of Elephant capture in Assam

Over a period of time different methods came to be associated with different areas. The capturing of elephants in pens or stockades is also known as *Khedda*. The word *Khedda* means to drive. In this method wild elephants were literally driven into a pen or stockade. The trench was usually thirty feet wide and twenty four feet deep. The excavated soil was thrown up into a steep bank on the outside. The only entrance was a bridge covered with a deep layer of earth, turf and leaves strong enough to take the weight of elephants. Female decoy elephants were kept in the enclosure. Men kept a watch from hiding places in the bank of earth and once a wild herd entered the enclosure they would demolish the bridge thus effectively trapping the herd. The wooden stockades evolved differently in different areas. This method is also practiced by the Khamtis of Assam. The elephants would be driven into the gully and cut off by drop gates and then secured to the side walls. In India this method became synonymous with the eastern part of the country especially Assam.

In Assam the size of the stockade were about the size of a tennis court and were circular in shape. The walls were built with comparatively flimsy jungle wood poles but were well braced with cross members and strengthened from the outside with heavy poles. No nails were used in the construction and all lashing were of cane. The stockades were usually placed near salt licks or elephant paths. There was a difference in the stockade erected along elephant path. These had two gates facing in opposite directions with a pair of funnel walls for each gate and often two stockades, one leading into another was built to accommodate large catches. Men in small contingent of approximately twenty five were used to drive the elephants into the stockade. At times elephants were driven in from long distances. Parties of men would keep the herd on the move without stampeding it. Once near the stockade the herd would be moved constantly within a specified area called the surround, which was demarcated by a cleared trace. This was called *kukker shikar* or dog tracking. The final drive into the stockade would always be done during the night as it was easier for the men to accomplish this task in the dark. The method employed for stockades situated near salt licks was different. There were no drives over long distances, instead a waiting game was played. Watchers were placed strategically on machans overlooking the salt licks. Once a herd was sighted these men would descend and warn the others. These men would then drive the herd into the stockade, again during the night, using torches made of dry wood/ bamboo. Men on holding lines would guide the herd into the stockade. The final drives were always done at night because it was impossible for small bands of men to manage it during the day.

The Ahoms of Assam also used female decoys to capture elephants but their method was radically different. A permanent trench was dug from the Naga Hills. It ran in a straight line to near their old capital, Rangpur near Sibsagar. It was deep but only sufficiently wide to allow one elephant to enter at a time. It had drop gates at intervals, for cutting off and impounding elephants as they entered, following the decoys. The decoys were fed on diet of special food and medicines as laid down in the *Hastiputhis*. These decoys emitted a peculiar and strong smell that would attract elephants especially males from a great distance.

Mela Shikar or lassoing a wild elephant from the back of a trained one, was most widely practiced in Assam. The basic team consists of three men, besides the *koonki* (trained elephant). They were - The *Phandi*, who does the actual lassoing, the Mahout, who controls the koonki and the Kamala or grass cutter who sees to the needs of the *koonki*. A man usually starts at the bottom i.e. as a grass cutter and eventually makes his way up to become a *Phandi*. During *Mela Shikar*, the Mahout's place is at the rear end of the saddle pad and not in front as is usually the case. He holds on to a sling with one hand and uses the other free hand to goad and control the speed of the koonki. The lassoing of the wild elephant and intricate maneuvering of the *koonki* is done by the *Phandi*. The hunt is usually carried out in small parties so that they can help each other in case of trouble. The hunt starts early in the morning with the tracking of wild elephant herds. The men communicate with each other with the help of signs and low whistles. Once a herd is spotted, the approach is made silently and swiftly, avoiding any bulls that might happen to be with the herd. Young elephants are the target with young females being most in demand, followed by young tuskers. Occasionally large tuskers are also sought, Makhnas are usually avoided. This preference is based on the market value of the various types of elephants. Top class *koonkis*, without instructions from their mahouts, use their trunk, head, legs and body to frustrate any attempts by the captive to escape. Once the wild elephant is noosed, the *Phandi* will haul in the slack and tie a check rope to the noose. This is done to avoid strangling the captive. The captive is then tied to the *koonki*, on the side where the *phand* or rope is attached to the *koonki*'s girth rope. There are specific rules about the art of managing the *koonki*, the method of handling and tying of the *phand*. Even the way of folding the *phand* on the *koonki*'s back is prescribed. While the rules are laid down it is experience and a long apprenticeship coupled with intelligence and deftness that produces an excellent *Phandi*. A *Phandi* relies on his experience and intelligence, pulling upward of the noose when he drops it over the elephants head, bringing it up tight without allowing the elephant to use its trunk to grab it, pulling in the *phand* swiftly at the correct moment, when to allow the *koonki* to go along with the captive and when to stop it, and the final tying of the check rope when the captive is under control. It is therefore no surprise that the *Phandis* occupy the top echelons among the elephant men. The capture of solitary males, especially those that are young and powerful is the ultimate test for a *Phandi* and a *Phandi* that brings in such an animal earns great kudos. At times when such animals are very powerful and put up a fight, more than one *koonki* and *phand* are used, this is called *Dohar* or *Tehar* (two or three). In such cases all the koonkis involved share in the catch. Often teams of *Phandis* worked together to capture larger numbers of individual elephants in a practice known as *Byle Shikar.*

The tribal population has a well connected system with these animals in Assam. The Rabha tribes, which is scattered along the continuous forest tracks of western Assam in the south bank of the

river Brahmaputra bordering Garo hills, are very close to nature and wildlife of this region. Traditionally, they were recognized as an expert *Mahut* and elephant keepers. They harbor tremendous knowledge about elephant management technique, catching methods and ethno-medicinal aspects. Moreover, Rabha folk tales and songs also added elephants as a prime subject. During colonial times, Rabhas played a vital role in the *Khedda* operations to catch elephants. There are several records of using the Rabhas by the *Zamindars* of *Mespara* to get access of wild elephants of those regions.

By the end of the Second World War the demand for elephants slowly died down and with the decline in demand, the elephant catching industry went into decline. Slowly, the elephant was declared a protected animal and capturing them from the wild became illegal. Today elephant capture is used as a tool to manage human animal conflict and is carried out by the Forest Departments of various states, which still maintain a large number of them. The days of the professional elephant capturer are over and it seem that with the further passage of time the art of elephant capture will die a natural death.

Despite a long and glorious tradition of domesticated elephants, there have been no systematic and conscious efforts in India to sustain this tradition. Domesticated elephants have been ignored both by the wildlife experts and the livestock experts.

Traditional songs on Elephants

In Assam, the traditional methods of elephant capture and training are interesting from the viewpoint of the rich variety of folk traditions, songs and myths that they have spawned.

However, nobody had recorded those vanishing cultural wealth. It requires persuasion to convince the community *mahuts* to share details of their folk knowledge. There are prescribed rules and regulations for revealing these esoteric sacred rituals. The songs associated with elephants have been influenced by both social sentiments and geographical factors.

Elephant capture and training operations take place in the jungles along the Indo-Bhutan border and in the jungles of eastern Assam bordering Arunachal Pradesh and Burma. These operations are led by *mahuts* of Koch, Rabha and Moran communities, who spent a long time inside the deep jungles cut off from their near and dear ones. They sing songs in their camps in the evenings to relax and keep up their spirits. Some of the songs are also meant to be sung to the newly captured elephants in a bid to calm them.

Thus, inextricably connected as they are with the elephant-lore peculiar to the region, these songs are an important ingredient of the folklore of the region. Various songs highlight the love between the mahut and his beloved. The famous Goalparia folk song *"…Tomra Gaile ki Aasiben.. Mor Mahut Bondhu Re…"* is the best example of such sentiments.

The rich forest lore in writings by Jnanpith Award-winning writer Indira Goswami, or the many autobiographies from the period covered in this book, could have added interesting insights into

the interaction of people and forests in Assam. The attractive reproduction of a painting from the Ahom illustrated manuscript on elephant care, *Hastiviyarnava*, on the cover promises a blending of indigenous and official lore, which does not quite materialize.

Elephant Festival

To create awareness about the conservation of Asiatic elephants, the Kaziranga Elephant Festival is celebrated at Assam. It is a unique event as trained elephants perform amusing activities in the festival, to give a delightful experience for the visitors. It encourages people for the need of conservation of elephants. The festival is organized by the government of Assam at the Kaziranga National Park. The festival is a joint venture of the Forest Department and Tourism Department of Assam and focuses on the ways of resolving the conflict between man and the elephant. Thus this festival illuminates the nature and habits of these animals encouraging people to live in peace and harmony with them. Another objective of Kaziranga Elephant Festival is the augmentation of eco tourism in this region. Through eco-tourism, awareness is created among the people about the deteriorating condition of the elephants owing to the limited or depleting natural resources.

Conclusion

There are different types of problems plaguing the North east region as regard to elephants– poaching (for ivory and meat), death of elephants by railways, death of elephants by electrocution, death of elephants by poisoning (retaliatory). There are also cases of human deaths caused by elephants. There are various factors leading to these human-elephant conflicts and thereby affecting their relationships. Pressure on available land (forests) due to increase in population and various developmental activities, is also increasing day by day. After the ban on logs in 1996 by the Supreme Court, the timber industry collapsed affecting the economic utility of the domesticated elephants. Elephant owners relationships became more strenuous as it became an economic liability to the owners. Due to lack of economic difficulties elephants are sold mostly to southern and northern states. But due to change in habitat the survival of the elephants itself has become one of the major issues. Considering the age old relationship between the human society and the elephants, it is the collective responsibility of everyone to ensure the survival of this great animal.

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