

Elephant in Trade between India and the Hellenic -Roman World: Commodity or Prestige Good?

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The glitter of gold and silver coins of the Roman emperors found as ‘Coolie loads’ in Indian subcontinent had often bedazzled scholarly opinion into presuming that the Indo-Roman trade commenced with the conception of the Roman empire. Consequently archaeological and historical researches focus around the Roman period. Whereas India already was well connected with the Republican Rome, Ptolemaic Egypt and the Hellenic kingdoms of Asia Minor and Europe as early as 4th - 3rd century B.C. The most pronounced indicator and also the little noticed one, is the impressive presence of Indian elephants and their handlers at all these places. Even this date can be pushed back further, if it is to be believed as some researchers would that Herodotus alludes to regiments of Indian troopers and Indian elephant handlers that he had seen on the north African coast during one of his visits to that land (Rance, 2003: 355). Classical authors write about Indian elephant with great interest and seem to take pleasure in pursuing knowledge about every aspect of this ‘rational animal’. Paradoxically they are mostly silent about their procurement by the westerners, other than occasional references to diplomatic exchanges which do not adequately explain the continued employment of Indian elephants in their warfare for centuries. This ambiguity makes it complex to locate elephant in the landscape of the India’s trade with the western world in antiquity.

The first issue that seeks attention is as to how the elephant trade remained excluded from the over exhausted but frequently rejuvenated field of study of Indo-Western trade, particular the phase of Indo-Roman trade. This is perhaps due to undue adherence to the modern theoretical framework. Fresh approaches are being introduced for study of ancient economies. There are two prominent schools of thought, Formalists, who do not see fundamental difference in the ancient and non-western societies from the modern capitalist societies (Wilk, 2005). Substantivists, on the other hand, recognize basic difference and also posit that economy is embedded in socio political institutions and modern theories applied to societies in non-western cultural context, will fail to serve the purpose (Dalton, 1969, Polanyi, 1957). Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-systems theory is seen as valuable contribution for the study of precapitalist societies (1975). He has considered empires of antiquity as world-systems, he divides empire into core and the periphery and proposes that there is economic flow from periphery to the core. Formalists principles are inadequate to probe into ancient economies, even Wallerstein did not attend to the outflow from the core to the regions outside the periphery.

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Similarly, trade theories formulated by anthropologists and economists have their own limitations. In its simplest form trade has been understood as exchange of things between the area of unavailability (Childe, 1942). Trade and exchange are not distinguished thus encompassing of wide range of activities. As reputed anthropologist as Webb did not differentiate between long distance exchange and trade (1975: 180-83). It is perhaps due to Webberian like approach that all the business in Indian elephant has passed off as exchange or tribute and 'trade' aspect has never been seriously enquired. Adams has put forward precise definition of trade as "trade implies risk taking, profit making, entrepreneurial behaviour (1974: 239). As such, long distance exchange is embedded in interpersonal relations whereas trade is set in market process. Private property and market economy had been counted as markers of trade and it has been seriously doubted that these were developed in the pre-capitalist economies (Skalnik, 1978). Such doubts do not stand grounds, particularly in context of India's trade with Egypt and the Roman empire. Archaeological finds at the Red Sea basin sites of Berenik and Myos Hormose have revealed that there were certain big business houses that controlled shipping and trade between the Indian ocean and the Red Sea (Sibedotham, 2005)." They were profit driven private people and operated independent of the state control.

Modern theorists classify items of trade and exchange into two categories essential staples and luxury good. The high value, low volume luxury goods are acquired by the ruling class to enhance their prestige, hence their trade is restricted and monopolised by the rulers and chiefs. This way it is suggested that a luxury good can never become a commodity or essential staple and not even a thought is given to a commodity moving on to become luxury good. Seemingly, most of these theories are grossly insufficient to capture the real nature and evolutionary pattern of Indian elephant trade Diaspora.

Elephant was introduced to the classical world as indomitable war animal and they seem to have been fascinated by its strength and strategic worth. The date of the first use of elephant in the battlefield in the west has no unanimity but it is almost certain that Indians had the oldest tradition of employing elephants in their wars and this idea was disseminated in the west through the Persians who adopted this from Indians. Kautilya, the Mauryan Minister, gives an elaborate account of multiple methods of use of animal in the war. Elephant corps were effectively used by the Indian Kings against the Greek invaders in the 4th century B.C. which emphasize that this has been a long practiced and perfected tradition in India. Some of the Greek writers who accompanied Alexander in his eastern campaigns and many of the Greeks and Romans who wrote in subsequent centuries about India, have one thing in common, they always take notice of and mention number of elephants in the armies of the Indian kings. They seem awestruck and take a pause from war-reporting and present vivid narratives about elephant hunting, taming, training, their nature and relations with their keepers and various other things.

The Greeks first encountered war elephants in the battle of Gaugamela in 331 B.C., which Alexander the Macedonian King fought against Darius the king of Persia. The Persian army fought with fifteen elephants which were captured by Greeks after the defeat of Darius (Arrian, *Anabasis*, Book III, 7-16). In the battle of Hydapses the Indian King Porus made use of a strong force of 130 elephants as the front line of his armies and he himself rode a majestic elephant. At this site Alexander is said to have remarked "I see at last the danger that matches my courage. It is at once with wild

beasts and the man of uncommon mettle that the contest now lies.” (Quintus Curtius Rufus, *The History of Alexander the Great*, Ch. XIV). The battle was won by Alexander but his soldiers were so frightened by elephant warfare that they became unwilling to advance further in India. (Plutarch’s *lives*, Ch. LXII) as they heard that the interior kingdom possessed even larger number of elephants. Diodorus Siculus affirms as he writes, “Alexander the Macedonian, after conquering all Asia did not make war upon the Gangaridai, as he did an all other whom he learned that they possessed four thousand elephants well trained and well equipped for war (*Bibliotheca Historica*, Book II, 37). Ever since the Eastern campaign of Alexander elephants became an integral part of armies of Greek kings and the Asian kings of Hellenic origin. War elephants figure prominently in their war agreements and treaties. Seleucus I, the Macedonian ruler of Seleucid empire attacked India in 303 B.C. and later concluded a treaty with the Indian king Chandragupta. According to the terms of treaty Seleucus gave his daughter in marriage to Chandragupta and ceded territory of Arachosia, that is a part of modern Afghanistan and coast of Iran. In return he received 500 war elephants from the Indian king.

Antiochus, the Seleucid King of Hellenic Syria (2nd century B.C.), in his alliance with Indo-Greek kings of Bactria gave his daughter in marriage to Prince Demetrius and in return accepted the war elephants of King Euthedemus (Polybius, *History*, Book XI, 34). Advancing further he descended in India and received more elephants as token of friendship from the Indian King Subhagsen, in all he received 150 elephants (*ibid*). These notices of classical historians emphasize the eagerness of western rulers to capitalize on opportunities to acquire war elephants.

Greeks very soon mastered the art of using war elephants and they proved to be of immense help in their encounters with the Romans. Pyrrhus of Epirus fought the battles of Heraclea (280 B.C.) and battle of Asculum (279 B.C.) with elephants in the fore front of his armies, this was also the first time that the Roman saw the elephants in the war field. Elephants prominently figured in the first and the second Punic wars between Roman and the Carthaginian (251 B.C., 218 B.C.). Hannibal’s famous elephant ‘Surus’ is believed to have been Indian. In the battle of Raphia (217 B.C.) and in the battle of Magnesia, Seleucid King Antiochus III fielded 102 and 54 elephants respectively (Polybius, 5.82). Writing about the battle Polybius made his famous but controversial remark that “African elephants had innate fear of Indian elephants and that they fled at the sight of Indian elephants (*ibid*). There has been an unending debate about the provenance of these war elephants. A careful scrutiny of early writers reveals the truth as simple as that the elephants used by Greeks, Seleucid and Persians were of Indian origin, some doubt may be expressed about the Roman and particularly Ptolemaic elephants. The regularity of employment of elephant in the Hellenic-Roman warfare strongly suggests that there might have been an organized trade in Indian elephants, otherwise, elephants captured as war booty or received as tribute may not have sufficed to fulfill this demand.

The African vs. Indian elephant controversy has reached a new level with recent researches on ‘Ptolemaic elephant hunts’ to challenge the theory of sweeping dominance of Indian war elephants in antiquity. Ptolemy I was a general of Alexandrian armies and accompanied him in his eastern campaigns and was a witness to elephant warfare. Later he became the ruler of North Africa. In his search for an alternative source of war elephants, he organized state sponsored elephant hunts in North Africa and

Ethiopia (Casson, 1993: 259). However, the objective of these elephant hunt was to capture war elephants is nowhere clearly stated, although the results of the exercise indicate otherways. In spite of having direct control and access Ptolemy could field lesser number of elephants than Antiochus III in the battle of Raphia. Though he could accumulate enormous amount of ivory, it has been pointed out that a sharp drop in the prices of ivory mentioned in inscription of Delos during the reign of Ptolemy-II suggests that the supply of ivory reaching markets increased significantly during his reign (Tarn, 1928, cited in Burnstein, 2005: 152). This information is concurred by the writing of a Greek papyrus discovered by Flinders Petrie. It records payments made to the soldiers for the elephant trunks having been obtained from the elephant hunts (Petrie, 1891, : 135-36) and dates to the reign of Ptolemy III (223-222 B.C.). It is possible that elephants were killed not captured during these hunts as Pliny (N.H. 8.4.7) and Periplus (3-4) show grave concern for decimation of elephant population in North Africa due to uncontrolled activities in the Ptolemaic period. Capture of live animal was an ingenious method and due to which unfortunately for the Ptolemy's, no one outside India had access (Casson, 1993: 249). All this information lends credence to the view that Ptolemaic elephant hunts in North Africa may not have been as relevant as have been projected recently (Burnstein, 2005, Casson, 1993) in terms of replacement of India as supplier of war elephants to the Western world.

Taming and training of elephant is a crucial factor in deciding the utility value of the animal for humans. Undoubtedly India has the oldest tradition of domestication of elephant dating back to 4500 years, since the days of Indus valley civilization. Indus Valley seals portray a perfectly calm and docile elephant. Vedic Gods, like *Indra* rode elephant. It would appear that since the beginning Indians developed a symbiotic kind of relationship with elephants. Classical writers unanimously praise the sensibility sensitivity and intelligence of Indian elephant (Arrian, on the Peculiarities of Animals cxxxvii, Tr. in McCrindle, 1901). African elephant is generally believed to be difficult to tame and to train. There may be two reasons for this - one is Biological and the other Cultural. Modern science approves that it is most likely that this is result of the best evolution of the cerebral motive coordination by the Asiatic species than by the African one (Stele, 1998, translated by Bannikov & Popov, 2014: 399). Culturally, besides Indian sources, Strabo (XVI.42) eulogises mild and gentle disposition of Indian elephant and Pliny (Nat. Hn. C. xx.ii) emphasizes their sociability and human like nature. Superiority of Indian war elephants is questioned some times. It is claimed that untamed African elephant theory is dispelled by the successful efforts of domestication of African elephants by the Belgians in Congo in the beginning of the 20th century (Bannikov & Popov, 2014 : 298). This seems irrelevant as this could be made possible only with the scientific and technical advancement of almost two thousand years which was not available to the African in antiquity.

Kautilya in his Arthashastra gives a precise and systematic description of the whole process of elephant catching, taming and training. According to him elephants should be caught at the prime of their life so that they can properly grasp the training (Arthashastra Book II, ch. xxxi). After catching elephants are categorized on the basis of their quality and ability to perform different tasks. The 'Superintendent of Elephants' is responsible for the training of elephants found fit for warfare. A comprehensive seven kind training programme is adopted which included drill (*Upashana*), turning

(*Samvartana*), trampling down and killing (*Vadhavadha*), fighting with other animals (*Hastayudha*), assailing forts and cities (*Nagarayanam*) and warfare (*Yuddha*) (Arthasastra, Book II, ch. XXXI).

This level of efficiency was not to be found among Africans not even among the Persian or Greeks. Their elephants in war were led by Indian handlers.

The domestic scenario of elephant affairs within India demonstrate that it was the most cared about member of the animal kingdom. As Kautilya has written so much about elephant, it must be having some economic reflections. Megasthenese, the Greek ambassador to the Mauryan court, elaborating upon social system of India, enumerates seven casts, among them the third cast was of Shepherds and hunterers (Strabo, Geography, Book XV, 41-42) who engaged in elephant hunting and training. In ancient India caste division was based on professional classification. The third caste pursued elephant hunting and training as profession and as means of their livelihood. The elephant hunts were a profit making private ventures as state collected revenue from the elephant forests as it did from the timber and the game forests (Arthasastra, Book II, XXXI). An officer, namely 'Superintendent of Elephants' was appointed to regulate elephant hunting, taming and treatment meted out to elephants (Ibid). It can be logically assumed that elephant hunting-taming was a commercial activity in antiquity in India and it would have considerably added to the state revenue.

There are external sources as well that support the possibilities of international trade in Indian elephants. Persians were the intermediaries and they handled these transactions. Greeks and Seleucids obtained their elephants from Persians. The carnae of the elephants was known as 'Zendhapet', a Persian word for Commander of Indians. Following the track the Greeks designated the officer who looked after the war elephants as 'Indovo' (Polybius, 1.40.15). A later day Greek writing *Totius orbis descripto* mentions that 'Indians have elephants without number which they dispose of to the Persians. There is a faint reference about the market mechanism of elephant trade in a text of even later date. Kosmos Indikoplustes writes that king of Sri Lanka imports his elephants (Christian Topography, Book XI). It may seem absurd in the light of the fact the Sri Lanka elephants have been praised by Aelian as being qualitatively better than Indian elephants (XVI.18). It is possible that he imported trained elephants from India. The rate of elephant was fixed as per cubit height of the elephant. Height is measured from the ground (Kosmos Book XI). Interestingly Kosmos admits that he has gathered this information from others, it may be that this information belongs to an earlier period.

Logistical concerns are major hesitation in accepting commercial exchange of elephants. Distance between India and the Helleonic-Roman lands was too long. It has been presumed that due to the weight of cargo and limited freight capacity of the then used sailing vessels, transportation of elephant through sea route might not have been possible. This doubt gains ground as *Periplus*, which meticulously records imports and exports of each sea port situated between Egyptian coast and East coast of India, never mentions elephants as commodity traded. But this is also true that generally direct overland and overseas voyages were not undertaken at that time. The trade was conducted through Middleman and Arabs followed by Sassanians dominated the Red-sea and Indian ocean navigation,

and by Periplus's admission, Arabians traded with large and sturdy ships (Stanza 16, 21). This relevant piece of information may not be ignored that Ptolemy inaugurated an ambitious project of exploration of Red-sea basin and Eastern routes with prime objective of finding alternative source of war elephant in 3rd century B.C. His efforts seem to have borne fruits as a century later Strabo observed 120 ships on the Egyptian coast ready to sail for India (II 5.12). However, there is overwhelming need for further research in this field.

Fortunately, there are firmer ground to propose that overland trade in elephant did exist in antiquity. Again the overland trade was pursued in 'relay pattern' where end to end journey was not required. Ancient land routes were divided into sectors and different sectors were controlled by different people, mostly backed by their rulers. A couple of centuries before and after the Christian era, the Parthian Kingdom in Persia conducted trade in Indian and Chinese goods. The Great Parthian route, also known as the 'Empirical highway' from west to east started at Antioch in Syria passing through the regions of Euphrates and Tigris, through Afghanistan (Isidor of Charax, Sec 1-19) landed in Taxcila in North India.

This later became part of Silk route network. Footsteps of Indian elephants journey to the west can be convincingly traced. Recently there have been interesting archaeological discoveries confirming the presence of Indian war elephants in the west. A plate decorated with war elephant has been found from Capena in Italy which is dated to 3rd century B.C.. A mosaic from Synagogue belonging to 5th century A.D. in Huqoq in Israel, named as Lod Mosaic has an enormous and very accurate depiction of Indian war elephant (William 2015, Photo National Geography). These elephants are attributed to India with certainty because they are decorated and figured with terrace (*Hunda*) and shields, the Indian exclusivity. Emperor Trajan received an embassy from India which brought elephants as gifts for him (Dion Cassius, History of Rome IX, 58). The ambassadors complained of arduous journey which occupied four years. By the standards of those days it may not have been a very long period, might not have been for traders in practice. Indian elephants average age is 70 years and according to Kautilya they are caught and trained at the age between 20-40 years. Then, even after consuming four years in transportation still, the elephant will be left with many fighting years in it. Therefore, this situation is neither impractical nor improbable.

Thus possibility of elephant trade in antiquity has remained neglected issue for long, entirely due to undue reliance on classical sources and less attention being paid to archaeological discoveries in reconstruction of trade. This is also due to the application of insufficient economic theories. Other than the author of Periplus none of the other classical writers wrote about trade as their prime objectives, they were either geographers, historians, cartographers and so forth. Though, circumstantially they strongly indicate towards the commercial viability of elephants. Elephant hunt and taming were the two major concerns in the Greeko-Roman world. About these, almost all the classical writers, who wrote about India, come up with long narrations. This was probably done in a 'comparative mindset' because they were aware of the difficulties faced with the African elephants. These writings would have

definitely impressed Greeks and Romans and would have helped in creating a market for Indian war elephants.

Similarly, trade theories applied to ancient economies fail to explain and consider trade in the commodities which are neither prestige goods nor staple essentials but goods of state interest such as war elephants. 'Elephant trade' of India reveals a very interesting aspect of trade i.e., the same commodity changing the nature and meaning over the time with changed circumstances and cultural, political environs. Around 1st c. A.D. there is a paradigm shift in the treatment of Indian elephant by the Romans. After the foundation of empire, there was comparative peace, effluence and opulence in the Roman society direct voyages to India started taking place with the discovery of monsoon by Hippalus. Romans came into closer contact with the Indians and their culture which held elephant as the noblest animal and the most esteemed one. Henceforth, elephant moved on from the battle field to the amphitheatres exhibits and being royal gifts. Indian elephants adorn the mosaics on the walls of Villas of wealthy Greeks and Romans and their way to the royal coinage.

It may be concluded that long distance trade in livestock awaits scholarly interest.

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fig. 1 Map of Trade Routes Belitha Press, UNESCO, 1996



*Porus Medallion issued by Alexander
Museum No. 1926, 0402.1, British Museum*



*Julius Caesar, Denarius
Museum No. 1978, 0108.187, British Museum*



*Terracotta Figurine of 2nd c. B.C. from Myrina Isle, Lemmos, Greece.
Louver Museum, Paris*

fig.2