

Elephants, empire, ecology and ethics

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THE relationship between the elephant and people in Asia is unique in several respects. An animal that has been regularly captured from the wild and tamed but never really domesticated, a beast of burden that has also trampled people and ravaged their crops, a supreme war machine that has at times played the role of ambassador of peace, feared and hated yet loved and elevated to supreme godhead, a creature that has played a pivotal role in the rise and fall of Asian civilizations, there has never been in the past nor will there ever be in future such a relationship between beast and man.

For over two millennia, however, the history of the Asian elephant is essentially a history of its use to further the imperial ambitions of Asian kings and European powers. This military role, either direct or indirect, eventually faded only in the second half of the 20th century. At the dawn of the 21st century the wild elephant faces a crisis in large parts of its original range, either due to loss and fragmentation of its habitat or its elimination within Asia's tropical forests. The role of the captive elephant is also increasingly being questioned today, and rightly so, on ethical considerations. We therefore need to redefine the role of captive elephants and ensure their welfare in a modernizing Asia in order to achieve the goals of conserving the species in the wild and in captivity.

The earliest evidence we have for the taming of the elephant comes from its depiction in numerous steatite seals as well as a terracotta elephant figure of the ancient Harappan civilization dating back to 2600-1700 BCE. The absence of any elephant figure with a rider on its back indicates, however, that the animal was unlikely to have been used as a beast of burden to any significant degree. People were familiar with the elephant during the Vedic period and used it to a limited extent, including as a royal mount as seen from a hymn dedicated to this animal in the *Atharvaveda*.

The oldest use of the elephant as an instrument of war possibly goes back to the early first millennium BCE. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have several descriptions of the use of elephants in battle, the former being more sober accounts while references in the latter (such as the *akshauhini* reputedly with 21,870 elephants) clearly hyperbole but suggestive of the entire period of transition in warfare during the first millennium BCE from the predominant use of horse and chariots, the development of the *chaturanga sena* or the four-fold division of the army, and the elaboration of the elephant corps in the republics, kingdoms and empire of the Indo-Gangetic basin.

Although Alexander of Macedon encountered elephants during his brief campaign in the northwest and even possessed well over a hundred elephants when he met Puru in the famous battle of the Jhelum,

he never used the beast directly in battle. Of greater significance are Greek accounts of the large numbers of elephants in the armies of rulers beyond the Ganges; this may even have been one of the reasons the Macedonians did not advance further East into India once they reached the Beas. The Greek sources mention anywhere between 3000 and 6000 elephants (Megasthenes gives a figure of 4000) in the Gangetic kingdoms during the period of the Nandas; even if one doubts these numbers there is no reason to doubt the existence of large elephant armies at this time – after all, a ready source of wild elephants was available in the region along the Himalayan foothills as well as central India.

The numbers of elephants in ancient armies swelled further by the time of Chandragupta Maurya who established the first empire in the subcontinent. Elephant forests (*gajavanas*) were identified to ensure a regular supply of these animals to the army. The Kautilya *Arthashastra* (300 BCE-300 CE) provides elaborate descriptions on the capture, training, and husbandry of elephants and their deployment in battle. It is clear that the captive elephant establishment was a major military and economic enterprise of ancient India. At the same time, wild populations were greatly reduced or wiped out across a wide swath of land brought under the plough and settlement in the Indo-Gangetic basin by Mauryan times.

A succession of rulers in the north, including the Indo-Greeks, the Parthians, the Shakas, the Kushans and the Guptas absorbed the earlier elephant culture. By the time of the Guptas there was probably a sharp reduction of wild populations as seen from the much smaller standing army with elephants. The southern rulers including the Tamil kings also captured and maintained elephants in their armies but with one major difference – while the *kheddah* or stockade method of capturing entire herds was popular in the North, the pitfall method was prevalent in the South.

The mythology of the elephant greatly elaborated during the Gupta age. The elephant had already become a sacred animal (*Gajatame*) in early Buddhist India during the rule of emperor Ashoka, a culture that also spread to the southern island of Lanka. By the Kushan or Gupta period of the 4th and 5th centuries, it was transformed to godhead in the form of *Ganesha* in Hindu India. The elephant culture also spread over a large area of southeast Asia. In spite of its rather turbulent relationship with people through history, the widespread reverence of the animal also contributed to its eventual survival in one of the most densely populated regions of the world.

Beginning in the 11th century, the Ghaznavids and the Ghuris, followed by the sultans of Delhi, shared the passion of the subcontinent's rulers to acquire elephants for their armies. The Mughals continued to build up stocks of elephants for use in the army to levels never seen before in the subcontinent. The emperor Akbar is widely acknowledged as being a connoisseur of elephants; he revelled in taming the fiercest bulls in musth, maintained 101 choicest bull elephants for his personal use, and took personal care of the animals in his *pilkhana*. Unlike the earlier Islamic rulers, who obtained elephants as tribute or spoils of war, the Mughals organized the capture of wild elephants, in the process causing their local extinction by the early 17th century in central India across

the Vindhyas and the Satpuras but not the Chota Nagpur plateau. Interestingly, the Mughals never seemed to kill elephants during their 'hunts', perhaps out of respect for the prevailing sentiment for the sacred animal.

The role of the Asian elephant was redefined during the colonial period. The Portuguese and later the Dutch looked upon the Ceylonese elephant merely as an object of lucrative trade. To the British the elephant became indispensable for logging the tropical forests of India and Burma for building hill stations to escape the torrid heat of the plains, and for supplying shipyards and the railways in the quest of imperial expansion. A realization that the timber elephant needed special health care also led to the development of elephant veterinary medicine, exemplified by a landmark treatise on the subject in early 20th century, borrowing from the emerging discipline of European veterinary science. This certainly benefited the captive animal in forest camps. A more negative aspect of the colonial engagement with the East was the introduction of sport hunting of the elephant in Ceylon and India, fortunately, to a lesser degree than in the African continent.

Post-independence across South and Southeast Asia beginning the mid-20th century, the wild elephant has lost enormous ground as forests have been rapidly cleared in many countries for expanding agriculture, commercial plantations, mining, dams to store water for irrigation and power generation, and linear infrastructural development in the form of roads and railway lines. The present-day range of the wild elephant is only about six per cent of its original range across the Asian continent. At the same time, sizeable numbers of elephants have been taken into captivity or eliminated due to hunting for meat, ivory poaching, or in the course of conflicts with people.

The culture of the captive elephant has come under greater scrutiny in recent decades from the perspective of animal rights/welfare. Increasing scientific recognition of the superior intelligence, cognitive levels and, perhaps, even a hint of self-awareness in a highly social animal makes it imperative that elephants are treated with far greater sensitivity than at present. Practices such as deliberately cutting the skin around an elephant's neck in order to inflict pain before fitting a noose (followed during Mauryan times) or, for that matter, marching elephants on hot tarred roads under a blazing sun for a large part of their working life in the name of religion (as seen in the present-day use of elephants for festivity in Kerala) are clearly not acceptable.

At the same time, we cannot wish away the 15,000 or more Asian elephants in captivity; we can indeed expect more wild elephants to come into captivity in regions such as southern India that are witnessing escalated elephant-human conflicts from dispersing elephants, ironically, with the success of conservation and consequent local overabundance. A necessary solution is to pay far greater attention to the welfare and use of captive elephants. We need to again redefine the role of the captive elephant in the modern world and ensure that sufficient resources, financial and technical, are channelled towards this goal.

* A more elaborate history of the elephant-human relationship is given in *The Story of Asia's Elephants* by Raman Sukumar.

