

Book Review: The Story of Asia's Elephants by Raman Sukumar

Text: Milind D. Patil

Belinda Stewart-Cox, the director of Elephant Conservation Network, Thailand once said "If we don't save the elephant what the hell can we save?" Surely, this book reflects as such a strong bond of giant beasts with us. THE STORY OF ASIA'S ELEPHANTS doesn't mean art history of elephants; rather reflects a golden thread linking them with the history of entire Asia. A divine creature created by the Lord Brahma with the help of two broken shells of The Golden Egg and sent them to rule over the most beautiful planet of the Universe, the Earth!

Although the evolution of trunk dates back to 60 million years, Asian Elephant revealed in its present form just 6 million years back. From Stone Age, *Homo sapiens* were using elephant derivatives like skin, bones and ivory. Harvested tusks were used as fence posts around the forest huts. Tusks were also used as a dibbler to sow millets and other grains. Elephant flesh was a part of their diet. Elephants played a pivotal role to augment the Asian civilizations. Mesolithic elephant drawings, discovered in Bhimbetka date back 8000 BCE. Taming of elephants was pioneered by the Harappan civilization around 4,600 years ago; and there on Asian elephant took part in the ritual ceremonies in Asia.

This story might appear incomplete if author hadn't mentioned about the Hindu God Ganapati (the supreme of *ganas*), as the Supreme destroyer (?). As per the *akhyaika*, a group of malevolent deities called Vinayakas were merged in to single vinayaka and appointed as the leader of Shiva's *ganas*. Certainly the agricultural fields of our forefathers were prone to the raids by elephants. Hundreds of beasts, if incidentally entered in to a field, nothing could be left behind for cultivators. It is thus not surprising that ancient societies worshipped an elephant-headed spirit to avoid such misfortunes.

During 6th or 5th century BCE Palakapya had written his milestone atlas on health, diet and behaviour of Asian elephants; *Hastiyurveda* and *Gajashastra*. Nilakantha's *Matangalila* is about a millenium old. "The sprouting tusks of young elephant, tinged red at its edges, resemble the eyes of a lady in love." Illustrations of *Sangam* poems describing the power, strength, beauty and overall splendor of Asian Elephant can make readers to re-explore these ancient Tamil jingles and other literature of the denizens of forest. Author has also described *Hastimangala* or Pooram, today's most famous elephant festivals of Kerala.



by Raman Sukumar, Marg Foundation 2011, pp. 339, Price: Rs. 3500

We could find the first most natural description of this animal in Rigveda. Intruding Aryans had never seen any animal possessing a long proboscis. They described it as *Mrigahasti* (animal with a hand). Author is quite certain about origin of the word *Elephas* in Greek, from *Ibha*, a Vedic synonym for elephant. Surprisingly, Lord Indra was still using the horse as a *vahan* in Vedic period and had not yet mounted Airawat- the royal white elephant! Hunting of elephants was a royal sport during this period is exemplified by the story of Shravan who was misfortunately bowed by Dasharatha, the king of Ayodhya, who mistook the sound of water filling the boy's jar on the banks of the river Sarayu for that of elephant's drinking. Readers could find the descriptions about the greatest honor deserved to the elephant in Ramayana such as "...Bharat...returned to Ayodhya with Rama's footwear placed on the head of a 'splendid elephant'... and not its back..." But it's a big secret to be revealed, why an elephant did not feature in Rama's army, or accompanied him during tireless search for his wife and even in the battle of

College of Forestry, Dr. B. S. Konkan Krishi Vidyapeeth,
Dapoli. District, Ratnagiri 415 712, India. Email:
milindp771@gmail.com

Sri Lanka. Surprisingly, on the contrary, there were 1000 fighting elephants in the forces of Ravan. But this whole emptiness gets refilled in the world's largest poem Mahabharata, the Battle for Hasthinapura (the Town of Elephants).

There are records of trade of war elephants between India and West. Pope's elephant was the most celebrated animal of Europe. Meanwhile Asian Elephants were also entered into the arenas of Rome. In India, one of the reasons why intruding Alexander retreated was the huge elephant armies of Indian Kings, with hundreds and thousands of rutting bulls, well trained and equipped for war. Akbar's pilkhana held about 5000 such war machines with 10,000 sharpened tusks. Badshah Akbar rode more than 100 times on a musth elephant and also engaged them in fighting. Readers will be surprised to know his age at which this hobby started- he was just 14!

Within few decades of intrusion of British in India the pinnacle glory of these war machines collapsed and they used them as 'timber machines'. The Asian elephant lost all its majesty. Around 11,000 elephants were at work in Burmese Timber Industry alone. During 1910 to 1950, 12,080 elephants were captured and 3370 were destroyed. Total 3026 elephants were captured from the forests of Assam before India became republic. Similarly around 2000 elephants were captured from Mysore. After the ban on logging in Thailand, many of them lost their jobs and were ruthlessly appointed as "the street begging elephant". On the parallel, few were hired into the circuses for entertainment. During 1970, there were around 7200 Ivory craftsmen in the country. Though the Ivory trade in India was banned in November 1986, author highlights that 15-20 tuskers are being killed every year in India.

The first records of Sanctuaries set aside for the protection of elephants are of Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. There were 11 officers to look after the elephants. Kautilya had also prescribed use of camels and buffalos to break the ranks of horses and elephants of the enemy with noise making devices tied to their backs. Readers can also find similar type of traditional conflict mitigation measures as "Elephants get terrified if they heard even a low grunting of pig" or "If an intruding elephant spotted or smelt the tiger skin it would keep away from their fields." Recent experiments of using tiger urine and playback calls to deter crop raiding elephants are just modern forms of those. The future wildlife conservation efforts and conflict mitigation measures should entirely be based on genetically inherited biochemical repulsive responses of wildlife because such behaviors are elastic. It is the only possible way to draw a life line between *sapiens* and the *maximus*!

Personally, I enjoyed this easy-to-read book as being a brilliant example of literature review and similar vivid graphic descriptions illustrated with good quality images. I congratulate Marg Foundation for publishing such a rock-solid text in Indian context. Here I would like to suggest if they published these narrations as a coffee table print for young and amateur naturalists. Asian Elephant deserved an honor of being national heritage animal in 2010. No doubt, author has triumphed through the meadow of Indian wildlife writings to achieve his endeavor of constructing a solid literature base for conservation of Asian Elephants.

