

Book Review: The man eating elephant by N.C. Bahuguna, I.F.S.

Released by West Bengal Forest Department

Reviewed by Sally Walker

As a reader, do you like horror stories, scary tales of ghosts, creating real life terror? If you read such tales, you must enjoy the shiver of your shoulders and the suspicion that someone or some thing is under your bed, behind the door, crouching in your closet while your heart pounds away.

Or, do you like to read sad tales, broken hearts and minds, helpless humans and animals at the mercy of someone or something while your tears stream down your face as if it was you in the the story or in life itself!

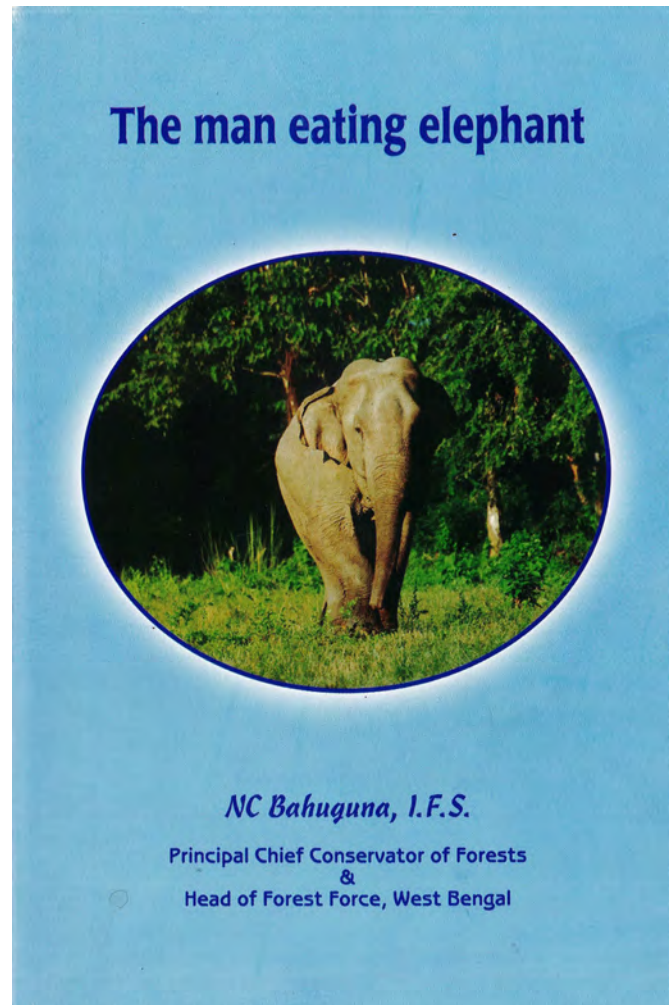
Recently, N.C. Bahuguna, an old friend of mine and officer of the I.F.S., presented me with a small book he authored. He said he had sent me the same book earlier but I did not find it in the piles of mail that accumulate when I am out of station. I felt bad that I didn't review his book sooner so I lay down on my bed to relax and enjoy it. The book was not relaxing! I couldn't even continue to lie down ... I just could not let it go.

I am writing a somewhat peculiar review to lure you to procure the book and experience the heart pounding fear and tearful sadness that captured me in this true story.

As the author begins he insures our immediate attention by declaring the book was based on an official report by the Forest Department of 13 people killed in a most horrific and painful manner in a little over two days, e.g., 50 hours. This bizarre tragedy is unique in the many tales both true and untrue. This took place mostly in the Duars, that is the north Bengal plains in the Himalayan foothills.

After a very few pages, the villain, the innocent villagers, the no good mischief makers, and a sort of militia of forest officers and police emerged to tell the story, if they lived.

It started on an otherwise ordinary day. A lone elephant, clearly in an furious state of mind, came out of the forest and into the villages of mostly poor people trying to scratch out a living. Elephants were not scarce there as there was forest all around, but for the most part they shuffled around leisurely eating whatever tasty vegetation was available instead of chasing people. The villagers, foresters and police had learned long ago to avoid irritating the elephants and took it for granted that they would poke around here and there and poach some maize and grains from the home gardens. They were part of life and the scenery.



However, on the 23rd of June 2002 on a very hot day a lone, angry elephant appeared from Kurseong Forest Division and made for the village and then a hut which was surrounded by maize crop. The owner of the hut noted the ferocious animal and went upstairs. Neighboring villagers were fleeing the area and shouted for the man to come with them but he would not. The elephant made straight for the house laid waste to it in short order. Chaitanya, the owner, was then face to face with the elephant with no protection so he quickly turned to run. In his haste he injured his foot on sharp wood splinters and the elephant caught him and lifted him up with his trunk. The elephant ran about 30 meters holding Chaitanya by its trunk then threw him down and stomped on him, assaulting him by kicking, grinding, and striking with bent knee for impact. After 10 more kicks the elephant sounded a deep, subterranean growl and moved on. Chaitanya was pulverized by the elephant, his head and limbs detached and spread.

That was only the beginning. The elephant then began a rampage of assaulting human beings and attacking dwellings. Seven (7) people were caught, mutilated and killed that day. It was the beginning of a little over two days of terror and despair.

The elephant was not done and continued a killing spree throughout the area. In the end 13 people had been killed, all of them suffering from unspeakable torment as the animal took them apart.

Why would an elephant search out seemingly specific persons to kill and why continue the punishment so long? This is not their way!

However, it is stated early in the story that this elephant was a female elephant, not a male as was thought by those who saw it. Such behavior is not habitual but when it is done, it is said that it is normally male elephants that do it. The elephant was shot and then it was revealed to be a female, ... a female that had lost every fear in its rampage.

It came to be known that this female elephant had a youngster that wandered a bit away and came into contact with a large group of local people who were trying to kill the elephants. The people focused their attention on the youngster and brutally tortured it with small stones, large rocks, crackers, burning "mashals" until it was dead. The sorrowful mother was forced away from the immediate area but in her mourning, she seems to have made a plan. She didn't stop to eat anything during her rampage, although all manner of good food was available to her. She didn't harm any animal. She did not assault a mentally challenged man although she could have in a moment.

Perhaps nobody really knows much about how and what elephants think but one could easily believe this elephant got her revenge.

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Joel Sartore is an outstanding photo artist who takes outstanding photos of wild animals. Joel's style is unique and he has travelled the world taking photos of wild animals. ZOO'S PRINT will feature a group of photographs by Joel every month, starting with next issue in which we will display photographs taken in India during Joel's visit.

Joel Sartore has produced more than 30 stories from around the world as a freelance photographer for National Geographic

He is an author, speaker and teacher who captivates audiences with his funny and inspiring adventures.

His images show a world worth saving.

We welcome Joel to the pages of ZOOS' PRINT magazine in its 30th year of publication.

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