

Elephants feature strongly in the mythologies of Hindu and Buddhist literature, and captive elephants have served as symbols of political power throughout South Asia. Historically, the state has sponsored captive elephant management, engendering oral traditions of expertise codified in the *Gaja Sastra* literature. Evidence of this textual tradition is found in Nepal where the Tharu people became the local specialists, dominating the capture and management of elephants, which have served as a commodity for imperial tribute, vehicles for regal hunting safaris, and recently as resources for biodiversity conservation and nature tourism.

# Captive elephant management, the Tharu, and the Nepali state

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*"The king who is for the welfare and wellbeing of the elephant will be victorious everywhere. The elephant is equivalent to the soul of the king, and so the elephant is to be protected. There is no other thing in this earthly world besides the elephant which has a greater power. To be without elephants is like a night without the moon, or the earth without sun-fed paddy. Likewise, if there is a huge army without any elephants, then it cannot be one of any great importance and grandeur."*

This encomium from a veterinary treatise issued by the Nepali Royal Palace sometime prior to 1923, is typical of the rhetoric in praise of elephants to be found in such Sanskrit works as *Kautilya's Arthashastra*, the *Hastayurveda* and *Nilakantha's Matanga-Lila*, as detailed in Franklin Edgerton's *The Elephant Lore of The Hindus*<sup>1</sup>. This Nepali treatise is consistent with the ordered information on elephant types and castes, elephant anatomy, elephant capture, and elephant ailments and treatments typical of the *Gaja Sastra* literature.

Edgerton's book is important for constructing the history of captive elephant management, not only because he understands the *Gaja Sastra* texts as constituting a genuine Hindu elephant science, but also because he argues that their substantive content represents the codification of orally-transmitted traditions of practical knowledge. In support of this contention he notes that although their rhetorical form is typical of *pandit* authorship, signature texts such as the *Matanga-Lila* contain over 130 technical words for which there are no clear Sanskrit etymologies. This includes terms applied to elephants in each decade of their working lives, which he concludes must have derived from elephant handlers' own vernacular terminology.

Edgerton also notes that much of this encoded knowledge is evident in practical traditions of elephant keeping where knowledge of the technical literature has fallen into abeyance. This he supports by reference to George Sanderson's *Thirteen Years Among The Wild Beasts of India*<sup>2</sup>. Sanderson had been in charge of elephant catching operations in Mysore and Bengal for many years and was one of the few British commentators to pay serious heed to indigenous understandings. Sanderson reported a modern elephant lore that bore a striking resemblance to that which Edgerton found in the Sanskrit literature - as I too found in my research amongst the mainly Tharu elephant handlers of Nepal, where only moribund traces of the *Gaja Sastra* tradition can be found.

## Constructing a history of captive elephant management in Nepal

Edgerton's work enables us to suppose that this textual tradition also exerted influence in Nepal, even if much of its wisdom now only persists in the practice of handlers' orally transmitted tradition. Little is known about the history of captive elephant management in Nepal. It has been a neglected topic among scholars, and sources with which to construct a history are few. Those we do have, however, are crucial for understanding the development of the *sarkari hattisar*, or government elephant stable.

A report issued by the Nepali Royal Palace in 1985 contains material indicative of the antiquity of elephant keeping in Nepal<sup>3</sup>. It suggests that elephant-keeping practices were established by the 6<sup>th</sup> century. It cites records attesting to the Lichchhavi King Mandev (464-505) building a bridge across the Gandaki River in order to transport hundreds of war elephants. Similarly, some of the architectural edifices of the Malla dynasty (12<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries) which superseded the Lichchhavi suggest the regal significance of captive elephants. Most notable perhaps is a statue of King Pratap Malla of Kantipur (1641-1671) riding a decorated elephant<sup>4</sup>.

Besides their use in war and as regal symbols, records also attest to captured elephants as a currency of exchange in relations of imperial tribute. In his 1924 book *Early Jesuit Travellers in Central Asia*, Wessels cites a report from 1672 that either the kingdom of Morang or Makwanpur paid an annual tribute of seven elephants to the Great Mughal<sup>5</sup>. Although this reference is vague, we can nonetheless be sure that the elephants would have been captured from the sparsely populated, malarial jungles of the Tarai, which were under the nominal control of Nepali hill states.

## The Tharu and captive elephants

These elephant capture operations would have been performed by the



Phanit bathing his elephant. Part of an elephant's daily routine is to be taken for at least one bath. An experienced handler will be able to bathe his elephant without himself getting wet. Courtesy of the author.

Tharu, the primary indigenous population of the Tarai, known as malarial-resistant pioneer agriculturalists who cleared jungle, captured and raised boar, and fished from the rivers. The *Panjjar* documents attest to this. A remarkable collection of 50 state-issued documents gathered over a period of 20 years by a Tharu man named Tej Narayan Panjjar, they provide the first definitive records connecting the Tharu to the capture and management of elephants in state-sponsored stables<sup>6</sup>. From these documents we learn that ultimately all elephants were royal property, that the elephant stable or *hattisar* was an institution of the state that received funds for the upkeep of elephants and salaries of staff, that the capture of elephants was rewarded with grants of land, that locals were required to supply their labour for elephant hunts in lieu of tax obligations, and also about the origins of some of the ranks and roles that structure the contemporary *hattisar*.

Although elephants were kept in the state *hattisar*, there is evidence that rights of usufruct were granted to individuals. Gifts of elephants were sometimes made for services rendered, especially since the Tharu were allowed to use elephants in their agriculture and logging. Indeed, this privilege was supposed to justify taxing local communities on their harvests when not providing obligatory labour (*jhara*) in elephant hunts (*hatti kheda*).

But some captured elephants were simply too precious to be awarded to locals, as in the case of Daya Raut who presented the King a one tusked elephant (*ek danta hattii*) during a royal visit at Hariharpur. Such an elephant was auspicious due to its likeness to Ganesh the elephant headed god, typically represented with a broken tusk. According to a document issued in 1827, for this Daya Raut was awarded the revenue collecting rights to Babhani village within Cherwant *praganna* (an administrative area) in Bara district. This was in addition to a previous document from 1820 in which he was awarded a grant of land and a turban of honour (*pagari*) for his service to the state. Clearly, involvement with the elephant business could yield considerable wealth and power in this era.

The aforementioned document of 1820 has further historical utility. It urges Daya Raut to continue performing capture operations according to the *jaghiya* and *khora kheda* methods (the former involving chasing, lassoing and tethering; the latter herding into a prepared enclosure), to obey

the instructions of the *daroga* (the stable manager), and to enjoy the customary taxes and income from performing the elephant training function (*sidhali rautai*). Besides the *raut* and the *daroga*, other documents refer to the *subba* (another term for a manager, not specific to the *hattisar*), and indeed these designations still persist in the institution of the *sarkari hattisar* in contemporary Nepal.

## The age of Shikar and after

Another key source is Evelyn Arthur Smythies' 1942 book *Big Game Shooting in Nepal*<sup>7</sup>. Chief Conservator of Forests for Uttar Pradesh in British India, Smythies also served as an advisor to the government of Nepal. His book is primarily a hagiographic account of the hunting exploits of Juddha Shamsheer Rana, the ruler of Nepal, said to have killed over 550 tigers during a 33 year period. It is significant for its accounts of regal hunting (*shikar*), such as occasions entertaining King George V in 1911, and Lord Linlithgow, the Viceroy of India in 1938.

Smythies describes the ring hunting technique, considered unique to Nepal. It probably developed from the *khora kheda* method of elephant capture, in which prey would be encircled by about 300 elephants, into which the hunter would enter to shoot from the back of an elephant favoured for bravery. During my field research, Bhagu, a famous retired handler known as 'The King's Mahout', recalled participating in such a spectacle as recently as 1960, when King Mahendra entertained Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom. The staging of such grand events reveals the need to maintain a large population of captive elephants through an extensive network of *hattisars*.

This last episode in the age of *shikar* represented an opportunity for the recently re-instated Shah monarchy to assert itself after the ignominy of the rule of the Ranas (ousted in 1951 in the wake of Indian independence). Indeed, the numbers of *sarkari hattisar* had shrunk during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, re-expanding at the behest of the resurgent Shahs<sup>8</sup>. This also represented a transition into a new era with elephants serving new purposes. Forests were no longer protected as hunting reserves, but as national parks dedicated to biodiversity conservation and nature tourism. King Mahendra granted the hunter John Coapman permission to establish the Tiger Tops safari lodge in 1963, from which guests viewed wildlife from elephant back, shooting with cameras rather than rifles, thereby pio-



Elephant handlers are responsible for more than just meeting their elephants' basic nutritional needs; they are total carers, and this can even extend to giving them a pedicure! Courtesy of the author.



Bishnu Chaudhury with Erawat Gaj. Bishnu Chaudhury has worked with elephants for 17 years, and driven Erawat Gaj for 14 years. Erawat Gaj is the tallest male elephant in Chitwan and plays a key role in the training of young elephants. Courtesy of the author.

neering a new tourist industry in Nepal. And years later, the ring method was again deployed from 1986 until 2003 during the rhino translocation programme which helped re-establish breeding populations of the Asian rhino in the Bardia National Park and the Suklaphanta Wildlife Reserve in the western Tarai.

This modern era of captive elephant management has seen elephants deployed in service to the new network of national parks and wildlife reserves, the embrace of western veterinary management, and the establishment of a captive breeding programme. The *hattisar* has also changed from a relatively autonomous and exclusively Tharu institution towards one increasingly integrated with the bureaucracy of nature conservation. With in-migration to the Tarai in the wake of deforestation, the USAID

anti-malarial programme and Rapti flood refugee resettlement in the 1950s<sup>9</sup>, the ethnic demography of the *hattisar* has also changed, so that Tamang and Newar peoples are additionally represented among the ranks of *hattisars*. Nonetheless, my research shows that the *hattisar* retains its distinctively Tharu character, and that the regulating authorities are yet to appreciate the full extent of the handlers' indigenous skill and knowledge in caring for elephants. A current epidemic of elephant tuberculosis holds out the possibility of greater co-operation and mutual understanding, as well as the impetus to recover threatened traditions of ethno-veterinary care and specialist local environmental knowledge<sup>10</sup>.

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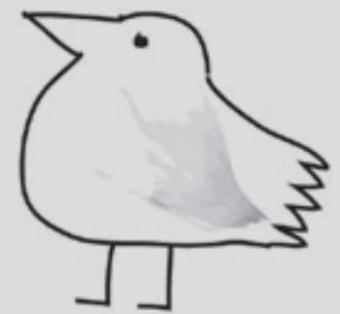
#### Notes

- 1 Edgerton, F. 1931. *The Elephant Lore of The Hindus: The Elephant-Sport (Matanga-Lila) of Nilakantha*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass
- 2 Sanderson, G. P. 1878. *Thirteen Years Among The Wild Beasts of India: Their Haunts and Habits From Personal Observation; With an Account of The Modes of Capturing and Taming Elephants*. London: Allen & Co.
- 3 Shrestha, M, T Dhakal & K Shrestha. 1985. (VS 2042) *hatti byabasthapan yojana tarujma pratibedan. (Report on Planning for Elephant Management)* Kathmandu: janchbujhendra bibhag raj durbar (Department Investigation Center, Nepali Royal Palace)
- 4 photograph reproduced in: WWF-Nepal 2003 *Hattisars: Managing Domesticated Elephants in Nepal*.
- 5 Wessels, C. 1998. *Early Jesuit Travellers in Central Asia 1603-1721*. Delhi: Book Faith India
- 6 Krauskopff, G & P D Meyer (eds). 2000. *The Kings of Nepal and The Tharu of The Tarai: The Panjar Collection of Fifty Royal Documents from 1726 to 1971*. Kirtipur: Center for Nepal and Asian Studies/ Los Angeles: Rusca Press
- 7 Smythies, E. A. 1942. *Big Game Shooting in Nepal*. Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co.
- 8 data from WWF-Nepal 2003 has been crucial in constructing a history of the *hattisar*, dealt with more extensively in my doctoral thesis *History, Practice, Identity: An Institutional Ethnography of Elephant Handlers in Chitwan, Nepal* (University of Kent, 2007)
- 9 Muller-Böker, U. 1999. *The Chitawan Tharus in Southern Nepal: An Ethnoecological Approach*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag and Ojha, D. 1983. *History of Land Settlement in Nepal Tarai* Contributions to Nepalese Studies 11(1)
- 10 Elephant Care International are working with Nepali authorities to combat the TB threat (which is not limited to Nepal's elephants), see: <http://www.elephantcare.org/tbnepal.htm>

This article is based on a forthcoming monograph entitled '*Servants of Ganesh: Elephant Handlers in Nepal*'.

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