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Living with Elephants

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Conservation efforts largely ignore landscapes where people and animals share the same habitat and conflict with each other. Making sense of life in such environments and easing tensions requires listening to local voices and knowledges.

On a wet autumn night, a herd of elephants marched into a paddy field in Sonitpur district of Assam.

This was not an uncommon event. For the elephants, the visit yielded them a meal. For the subsistence farmer tending the crop, it was a year's produce lost, causing immense damage to the family.

Maan Barua's *Plantation Worlds*, which opens with this sombre incident, gives us a feel of what it is to live like an Adivasi or a poor farmer, whose fields are regularly uprooted by these "uninvited" guests. Elephants are to the villagers "gods" or "baba," referencing the deity Ganesha. At other times, they are "bulldozers" causing damage to houses. When people abandon their destroyed houses, the helpless villagers describe it as an eviction drive by the state, calling elephants "government dacoits." Ganesha can quickly turn into a malevolent icon.

A striking photo Barua reproduces in the book is of a poisoned elephant on whose body is written, in Assamese, "*dhaan chor hathi Laden*," which translates to 'the paddy thief elephant, Laden'. The reference to Osama bin Laden tells us about the panic and terror caused by the elephants in the early 2000s in and around Tezpur, the same town where I am now based.

For many of us, it is difficult to imagine living in a place where elephants visit homesteads, destroy crops, and even kill poor folk, who, out of frustration and anger, sometimes retaliate and kill elephants. How do people, forests, and animals live in a deeply interconnected landscape where plantations, extractive industries, and modern conservation overlap, creating tensions and frictions of different scales?

New landscapes, new elephants

To make sense, Barua builds on the term 'plantationocene,' used to describe large-scale devastating changes and planetary transformations triggered by extractive plantations in the global South. He describes Assam, a border state and a resource frontier, as a "South within the South." Assam was of interest for the colonial administration to profit from large-scale forest- and plantation-based economies. The extraction of commodities like timber and tea resulted in aggressive and unprecedented changes in forests and the ethnic composition and impacted the ecology of wild animals, mainly the elephants.

This resource extraction continued after Independence, but this time, elites and the state had monopoly control. Political unrest against the underdevelopment of a region with abundant forests and oil, combined with the union government's apathy, led to what came to be known as the Assam movement. Building infrastructure to break free of Plantation's dead grip on the state's economy was an important dimension of self-determination as the Assam movement gathered steam in the 1970s. The Numaligarh oil refinery was set up in 1994, as part of an accord between the union and the movement, one of whose resentments was how crude oil extracted from Assam was sent outside the state to be refined.

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As Barua points out, "no installation of the infrastructure is outside of a political and ecological vein." The refinery's site enclosed a spot where elephants gave birth to calves. Undaunted by the barriers that had come up, the elephants repeatedly broke the boundary walls. Similar stories of violence unfolded during quarrying in the Karbi Anglong hills – again, carried out to build infrastructure for Assam's new economy – leading to the degradation of habitat that supported and sustained the lives of humans and more-than-humans.

Roads, fences, and industries: the new landscape put up obstructions for the peripatetic elephants, forcing them to visit crop fields. Tensions rose, leading to the deaths of both humans and elephants. The human mortality though was of the rural poor, rather than

urban middle classes and elites.

The animals too changed in behaviour. Elephants are typically matriarchal, but in Sonitpur, Barua and other researchers observed a herd with an all-male group, which is novel. Barua also encountered a different and an unexpected facet of human-elephant relations, one shaped by alcohol. The men who “confront elephants at nights” as they guard the crops for four months of the year drown in alcohol to relieve bodily fatigue. But this alcohol can be fatal in more ways than one. Elephants can smell and even develop a taste for the local spirit, which in turn can create chaos as they destroy houses. Such encounters are but one of the several ruptures in the lives of impoverished rural families who dwell alongside elephants.

Sutures or ruptures?

Elephants need clear pathways to move from one place to another. The fragmentation of forests by plantations, roads, refineries, and other infrastructural sites has created barriers for their movement. Connecting these fragmented habitats is important for elephant conservation in the terrain between Kaziranga and the Karbi Anglong hills. For wildlife conservationists, a solution is securing land for corridors which elephants can use to move from one fragment to another without venturing into villages or plantations. Local communities are sceptical and see it as part of “coercive models of conservation.”

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Contestations over securing elephant corridors highlight yet the politically sensitive issue of land acquisition for conservation, which people believe results from a strong nexus between the state and NGOs. Connectivity, Barua points out, is a new way of controlling and exerting power in the region. For the state, conservation has become a new way to govern large tracts of land in the name of elephant protection. The role of NGOs in purchasing private land for conservation is closely tied with capitalism and is a matter of debate in conservation circles.

The tensions on the ground emerge also from the science of conservation. The dominant discourse in ecological sciences disregards and dismisses knowledge emerging from non-European regions. This has been the template for Indian wildlife conservation till recently. Wildlife biologists have long disregarded the traditional knowledge of Adivasis and other communities whose lives are embedded in the forests. Without engaging with social concerns, a technocratic approach is often disconnected from ground reality, ignores the socio-cultural lives of people, and ends up alienating them.

Barua dedicates a whole chapter to the Adivasis’ view of their forest and of how elephants negotiate landscapes. The Adivasi belief is in an animal guardian, a ‘devata’, or a spirit called ‘dangariya’ that helps us navigate using the cartography of animal movements guided by spirits, seeing a different way by which “life is spatially, culturally, and economically arranged.” Such views do not sit well with the dominant conservation approach. But engaging with Adivasis’ knowledge of animals and forests can open up opportunities for collaboration and help shape conservation initiatives in such “violent environments.”

Plantation Worlds is that rare work that brings out, through multilayered stories, the lives of people and elephants who share the same habitat. Its clarity and details challenge the conservation paradigm that overtly focusses on protected areas and neglects the human-dominated landscapes frequented by elephants. Barua’s work stands unique as he tells the story of the lives of Adivasi and elephants, which were not only shaped by plantations but also by the large infrastructure, ‘exotic’ plants, and modern conservation.

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