

Elephants in Indian Kingship: Conservation, Exploitation, and Divine Reverence

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ABSTRACT

The species of proboscideans *Loxodonta Africana* and *Elephas Maximus* from *Pleistocene* age had survived in Africa and Asia respectively. Since the dawn of the time “Asia preferred its elephants alive and African as dead¹. Asia and its elephants lived together as partners for thousands of years. There they were treasured, deified, and venerated as noble champions, hunting companions, and staunch, loving friends². More specifically to India as Thomas Trautmann argued that they are deeply embedded in Indian kingship. The number of elephants in India remains the same over two thousand years from Later Vedic period till the beginning of colonial period remains the same. Indian kingship from the earliest exploit elephant primarily as war assets. India kings from Maurya to Mughals keeps large number elephants at their disposal. Thus, elephant represent kingship well. But the conservation that Indian kingship sought during such a period can only be critically analyse as Thomas Trautmann put “To understand the persistence of elephant as well their retreat it is essential to understand the relation of kingship to elephants, and specifically the Indian model of kingship within which elephant capture and use were essential components³.”

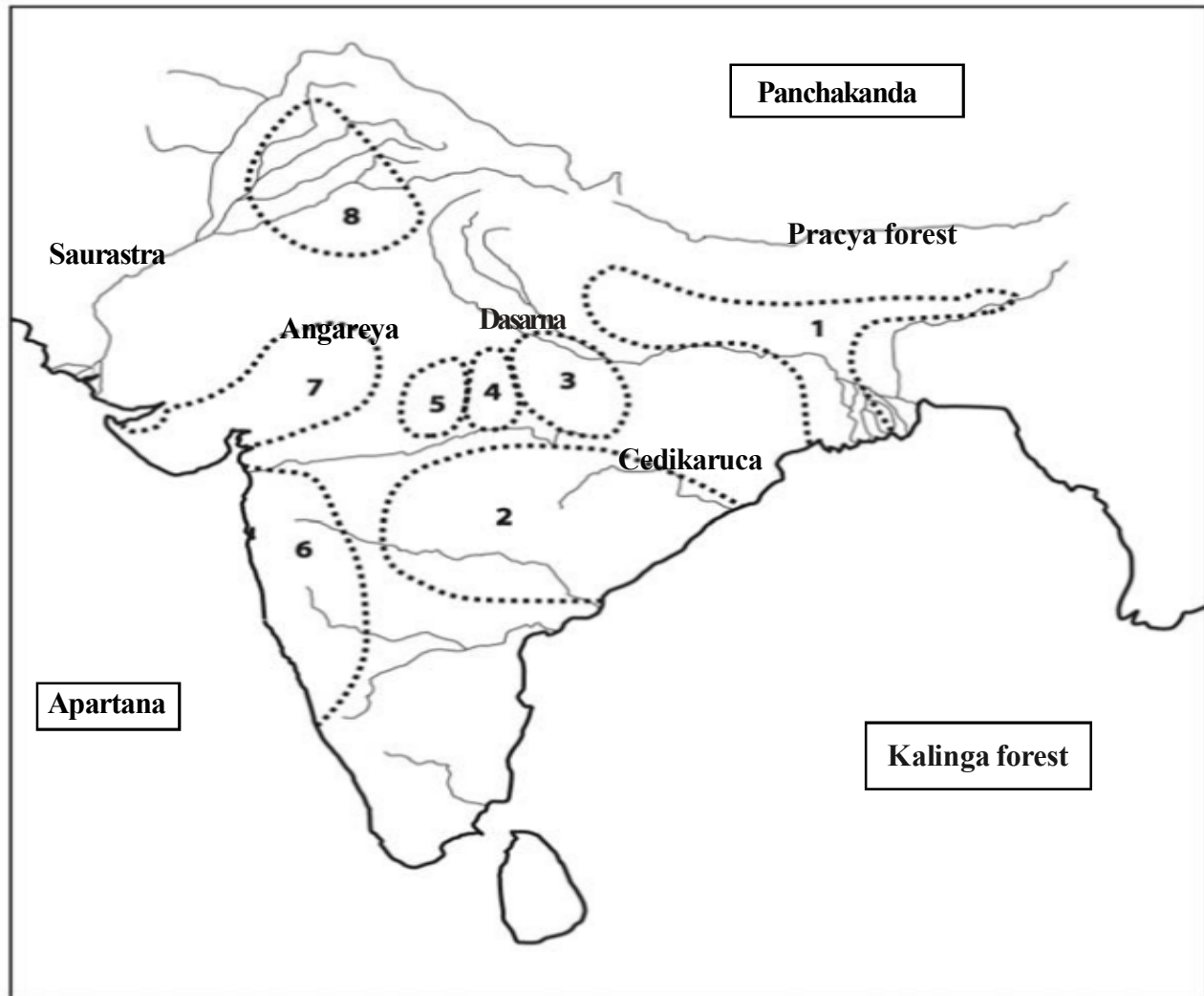
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The Vedas provide the earliest sources of relation with elephant. The later Vedic associates the elephant with Indra the king of devas i.e., cosmic elephant Airavatar. This was the period as Ramayana and Mahabharata much say about the importance of elephant in the warfare. Even the concerned of about the elephant is mentioned. Rama while moving in exile advised Bharta –“You are protecting the elephant forests, I trust, and attending to the needs of the elephants”¹.

Later with the rise of Mahajanpadas and invention of war elephant foster conservationist policies of kingship towards elephant. The elephant was an important component of chatutarangi sena. As Franklin Edgerton - put “, the Hindus treated elephantology as a branch of the Arthashastra, the science of state craft. It goes without saying that the care and training of elephants must have been chiefly a function of state officials”. The elephant was considered as jewel of chakravarti king i.e., (Hathi Ratana). Various lore written about the elephants since the time of Arthashastra such as Asatalika, Matanglila, Gajashatra, Gajasiksha, Hastaayurveda Alexander

also faced war elephants in battle of Hydrpass. Alexander historian reported that Nanda had 4000 elephants. Seleucus said to obtained got 5000 elephants from Chandragupta.

Trautmann argued relation of king to elephant is four cornered relation i.e., king, elephant, forest people. As it was uneconomical to raise elephant in stable. The only practical way is to capture them as wild adult. So, the king had to protect them in the forest. As mentioned earlier kings treat elephant as war machinery so kings had to protect their habitat for constant supply. Even the kings had saved the elephant from the farmers as they cause suitable harms to the crop. The elephant management and protection go hand in hand we can see it in Arthashastra and Ain-i-akbari. Arthashastra mentioned that elephant is not hunted and it was used for hunting it also talk about sanctuary where animals were protected called sarvathimargam. Its give description that forests people keep an eye that elephant not hunt for ivory otherwise as Trautman comment that Maurya’s had total monopoly on elephant. It also describes forest



8 types of elephant forest in Arthasastra as identified by Trautmann

overseer staff which keep records about every activity of elephant and keep tracking them. Arthasastra also gives description eight type of elephant forest.

The war elephant did not detach from kingship even after the establishment of Turkish empire in India. The war elephant eulogizes by poets and contemporary like Amir khusrau. The sultans of Delhi possessed about 3,000 elephants in pilkhana, of which 750–1,000 animals were of sufficient size and condition to be used in battle. Later the Mughals tradition was kept by Mughals with more zeal. The emperor Akbar was connoisseur of elephants. During the period of Jahangir number of elephants in the Mughal stables had swelled to 12,000 with over 40,000 in the kingdom². Mughals give name to their favourite elephants like Akbar had DURJAN SAL.

Ain give elaboration of elephant management i.e., keepers trainers and other elephant staff. Also it mentioned, as Arthasastra that elephant used for hunt they were not hunted.

As the priest king relation in ancient period elephant also got protectionism of religion. Buddhism and Jainism also represent elephant. The rise of elephant headed deity from third century A.D in Hinduism and we see full fledge Ganesa sculpture from 5TH A.D. Taboo on the consumption of elephant meat can since the Mauryan time but 1,200 years ago, the elephant had risen to the status of an important god, and a universal taboo on its killing and consumption was firmly established across the sub-continent⁶.

The Other Side.....

The kings protect the elephant but exploit them otherwise i.e., as war asset. The suffering of captive elephant was enormous can be seen Mauryans to Mughal. The live capture like Kheddah gave many wounds to them. Matanglila mentioned emotional suffering of elephant saying that elephant was not easily forget the memory of freedom in forest. They had to

suffer while they got changed in their diet under domestication. Kings only paid much attention to musth elephant ,not to sick and old elephant. They were starved for many days during the period of training. During Mughal animal fighting as entertainment become common for nobles . Elephant suffered a lot while representing king's superlative status.



Elephant capturing Akbarnama. Source(Trautman:2015,171)

Outside The Borders

The use war elephant after its invention in India from 1000 c.e spread else both in west and the east. The nearby china was not much influenced but so-called Indianizing kingdom of southeast Asia greatly influence by Indian model of kingship so the use of war elephant. Extensive use war elephant by Khemer empire and Ayutthya empire in southeast asia . In modern day elephant found in mainland Southeast Asia, in Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. They are used as pack animal during WWII in Burma by Japanese and in Vietnam. Elephants are still used in Southeast Asia where bulldozer cannot work as in impassable terrain or in muddy areas. They also found to perform heavy-duty tasks like felling trees, carrying out logs, and clearing paths and roads. In Thailand elephant tourism is become major attraction there these days. Elephants used for diplomacy purposes and trade. King of Thailand offered elephant to Lincoln as in civil war effort. Elephant also used as soft power even in modern. There is trade exist between silence and the south east countries. Sri Lanka also export elephant to India during sultanate. Beside Myanmar from colonial period till present have used elephant in timber industry and got the term timber elephant. Ivory market exists in these countries and as sukumar mentioned it come from local population of elephant. China did not use elephant as much in war. The evidence we got is few. There was incident of cursing rebellion with elephant during Zhou period. Trautmann concluded that “On the whole, kings in China seem to have used elephants for display and for their ivory, and to have taken credit for clearing the forests of wild animals and making them safe for farming. war and were not in later times receptive to the eastward spread of the Indian war elephant. They did not institutionalize the use of elephants in war.



Conclusion:

It is clear that elephant as representative of Indian kingship got protection although it was only due to that they were used in warfare. So, we can say they are conserved while targeted. As mentioned, captive suffered in different ways .However, there number remained the same till precolonial period. Trautmann used report of Elephant Task Force (2010) to argue that the drastic shrinkage of habitat happens over the colonial and then national periods of India’s history. The war elephant diffuses elsewhere from India especially in Indianizing state of south east asia. There use was done for pomp and show of royalty, diplomatic gifts and as heavy force in later period. Elephant used primarily for ivory in china.

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