

FOREST NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

(I)

THE JOURNEY OF A BLIND ELEPHANT

In the year 1998 February, a strange visitor somewhere from the southern end entered the borders of Bihar from Orissa. It was full-grown with two huge tusks. One of its tusks (the left one) was badly corroded, whereas the right one was in good shape. Though the movement of Elephants in herds from Orissa to Bihar and vice-versa is not uncommon, but the fact was that this visitor was an Elephant, single and blind. The route adopted by this animal was always pucca road and path and it left the pucca path only for occasional foraging in agricultural fields. After its entry into the Bihar border, news about it started pouring in the State Forest Headquarters, every day. The main problem with the Elephant as was reported in the newspapers was that it was causing great damage in agricultural fields. Everyday this Elephant was the subject of small but many news items in local newspapers. Gradually it started attracting the attention of some NGOs also who showed their concern for the safety and welfare of the animal, although no individual or NGO came forward to do concrete work in this direction.

Gradually, its daily movement pattern emerged. The Elephant would move on the road with occasional breaks for "Lunch"/"Dinner" in roadside field of farmers. After eating its fill, the creature would take to the road and start for its onward journey. The destination of this journey was known

only to this Elephant. We, the wildlife managers with all our bookish knowledge, were trying to tackle the situation from our end. Gradually this Elephant became very popular in the area, and most of the villagers in the region knew that an Elephant had come to their area and it might visit their agricultural fields also for his share. In their conversations, people gradually got polarized into two diametrically opposite views : one, the "conservationist" which considered the foraging activities of the animal as a temporary aberration, whereas the opposite camp started painting the activities of the Elephant as devilish, decrying the loss of crops due to the animal. However, practically, no villagers came forward to the Forest Department with claims to assess the loss. The villagers did not ask for compensation. Rather, they said that the "Elephant God" had taken his share and had moved on. Probably this tolerant attitude towards the Elephant, saved to great extent, these giant species to survive in the jungles of India from the poachers. But the publicity received by this Elephant in the newspapers created pressure on the State Forest Headquarters, when all sorts of news came in. Some was simply hearsay and some totally false.

Anyway, the Elephant, oblivious of the publicity it was receiving in the press, continued its onward march, which it perhaps started from Orissa (not sure). This "lone ranger", with no history and

geography behind its origin, kept on moving. And one fine morning it appeared in Jamshedpur town, that too in the Forest campus of Mangoh. The Elephant might have come to make its presence felt in the records of wildlife managers.

It was still unknown as to whether this Elephant was of domestic origin or wild. One school of thought was that this Elephant was of domestic origin, probably escaped from some temple or due to old age it was abandoned. Its non-fearful behaviour, callus like formation near tail-base and perforated ears supported this theory. But the other group opposed this by saying that before freeing a domestic animal, its tusks must have been removed. Similarly, it did not respond to commands of 'Mahauts' which were temporarily engaged to control it. It is also not known from which State it originated. Thus bereft of any history and geography behind it, the animal stayed in the forest campus of Mangoh, where it was given lavish treatment by senior forest officers. The Elephant was given pumpkins, bottle-gourds and other vegetables, besides staple leaves.

But for some reason, this traveller, who had decided to become a nomad, started feeling uncomfortable or bored in the forest campus of Mangoh, Jamshedpur. One day it left the place and after a few days of journey it crossed the boundary of Bihar and entered West Bengal. The concerned forest officials of Bihar felt a sense of relief at its departure, but this was short-lived.

One fine morning the animal again reappeared in Muri village of Ranchi District, Jharkhand crossing the river Subarnarekha. The old 'circus' or 'tamasha'

started being enacted again with thousands of people watching this majestic animal gambolling on roads, unconcerned of any power on the earth. Except for temporary annoyance to the farmers, whose crops it preferred to graze, the rest of the crowd seemed to enjoy the show. But the local press and small time politicians started making a issue of this. The foresters did try to contain its activities of crop damage. Apart from this, the animal was quite gentle and it caused no harm to any onlookers, wherever it went. Taking the cue from the administrators that "No administration is the best administration", the foresters also left full discretion to this animal for its tour programme, except for watching it from eyes of most dreaded creature of the earth i.e. humans, as it was apprehended that some poachers may kill this Elephant for its huge tusks.

Here, something about this animal is worth mentioning. As described earlier, it was a full-grown animal in very good health. But it had an injury on its back, which had converted into a weeping sore. During its stay in Jamshedpur, this sore was dressed with ointments after necessary cleaning of the wound with lotion. Perhaps the Elephant enjoyed this treatment as it hardly caused any hindrance to the "doctors". Later, the animal was much troubled due to flies and other insects attracted to its wound, so it covered the wound with mud. This did not allow the wound to heal, rather, it aggravated it. The blindness of the Elephant was no handicap as it was compensated by its intelligence and the tolerance of general people it received. The Elephant by its intelligence, smelling power and experience would very carefully avoid any obstacles; when annoyed by poking or occasional disturbance by rowdy children, it mock

charged. But its reactions were a bit slow compared to a normal Elephant. One thing also became clear - it had become stubborn while raiding crops. It had taken for granted that no physical harm would be caused to it except shooing away by farmers. Hence when in fields, it would eat its favourite crops undisturbed.

After a few days, the animal entered the limits of District Hazaribagh. Here it became the unwanted guest of Hazaribagh forest and district administration. There it tried to move Northwards, perhaps to Patna. But the local foresters held the view that it should be directed to Ranchi Zoo, where it could be put in captivity and Bihar Forest Department problem would be solved. Thus a squad of forest staff directed the animal to the road for Ranchi and left it at the border of Ranchi near Chutupallu jungle.

It was the month of September 1998. The Elephant as usual moved slowly towards Ranchi, the Headquarters of Bihar Forest Department. Ranchi being the worst affected district by the wild Elephants in the State, this news made everybody panicky. The area, where Elephant had moved in was in C.D. Block Ormanjhi. This was not a problem affected Block by wild Elephants but people apprehending more problems in future and more because of petty politicians, made a lot of hue and cry. This created pressure on local foresters. In order to protect the crops from being damaged, the Elephant was driven to take it straight to Zoo, on a wet September day of 1998. But the poor Elephant, which had already covered the distance of 10 km, decided to rest in Ormanjhi Thana campus. A Mahaut was also engaged in the operation for driving. Since it was a crowded locality, it was decided to tie one

of its feet to a nearby tree. The Mahaut did help the foresters in this process and the Elephant was fed with jaggery and paddy straw at night. Since it was getting late, two forest staff were asked to keep vigil at night thinking that in the morning it would be rehabilitated in the Zoo, which was a kilometre away. The staff found the animal to be normal at night, but at 4 O'clock in morning they found it making no movement. The panicky staff immediately informed their superiors about its no longer being alive.

By morning, it became clear that as the Elephant was tied to the tree, nearby which a telephone line passed, the Elephant had broken this wire its trunk during the night. The broken wire of telephones fell on electric wires leading to the Thana building and thus electrifying the telephone wire. This electrocuted the Elephant. This was further proved during the inquiry and the post-mortem report substantiated it.

Normally, as is the local tradition the Elephant has to be buried *in-situ*. But as it was a thana campus and police staff did not want to spare the land for the Elephant, apprehending it would not only create a temporary problem but for the future also. Their refusal was compounded by the reluctance of Zoo staff, who also showed their reluctance in sparing space for burial in the Zoo compound. The locals, who by that time had gathered in thousands for final prayer and pooja, were adamant that it should be buried in the same place where it had died. The process of post-mortem also took time. Finally, as it was getting rather late into the evening, it was decided to bury it in the jungle of Chutupalu, at a distance of 7 km from the site. The animal weighing 3.5 tons approximately, was not easy to move, what to speak of

transportation. This led me to realise why there was a 'custom' or tradition of *in-situ* burial of an Elephant. Anyway, at night, a special breakdown vehicle, fitted with chain and pulley was procured. The Elephant was hoisted with the help of ropes and chains to this vehicle. The huge creature dangling in three rope chains, was moved slowly with its trunk wiping the road. What a ghastly (unusual too) sight ! Finally, it reached the selected spot amidst the jungle of Palu, and left for the next day's job. Partly due to extreme temperature and also elapsed time of 48 hours, the body of the Elephant had bloated and started stinking. Also the soil was very hard, but specially procured labourers could dig the pit and it was shifted into it by hoist-chains. Then it was covered with heaps of salt and minespoil. Even then, the bad smell persisted for more than 15 days

creating problems for passersby of NH 31.

In a tropical country like India, all organic matter tends to decay rapidly as the jungle is usually alive with insect and animal life. The carcass of the dead animal very soon disappears due to white ants and a host of other insects, dry rot, damp rot and the ceaseless gnawing of the remains by a multitude of large and small animals. So was the condition in the case of the 'grave' of this solitary Elephant. During the process of burial, I remember hearing a shot-like noise from the body. Perhaps it was the bursting of the skin by which gas from the digestive system escaped.

And thus ended the journey of a lone nomad. Nobody knows from where it started.

H.S. Gupta, IFS.
Divisional Forest Officer,
Research and Evaluation Division,
Ranchi (Jharkhand)
