TRADE IN ELEPHANT AND IVORY : SONEPUR (INDIA), 1991

by
D.K. Lahiri - Choudhury
Calcutta, India

Sonepur in North Bihar, India, across the river Ganga from Patna, the capital of the state, holds an annual animal fair in October/November (the date is fixed according to the lunar month and falls on the full moon day in the Indian month of Kartick). This year the fifteen-day fair was officially inaugurated on the 21st of November with a ceremonial worship in the local temple, erected to mark the mythological fight between an elephant and a crocodile which was supposed to have lasted for a millennium. The history of the *mela* or fair goes back a very long time - nobody knows exactly when it began except that it is very, very old. This writer even in 1976 saw more than 600 elephants being paraded for sale there. Complete stoppage of capture of elephants in India since 1982 has had a drastic effect on the number of elephants in this *mela*, and this trade is likely to die out in course of time if the present drift continues, and with it will die more than a millennium-old tradition. There were c.380 animals up for sale in 1983; 350 in 1984; 225 in 1985; 215+ in 1986; and c.225 in 1987. This year only 90 elephants had been put up for sale. The break up is as follows:

Male		Female	Total
Makna	Tusker		
6	48	36	90

The tallest elephant in the *mela*, a tusker, was about 9'9" (298 cm.) high, according to official estimate, and the smallest was 6'2" (188 cm.). It is to be noted that there were no calves at Sonepur and only one sub-adult animal [below 7' (213 cm.) in height]. More than 50 per cent of the animals were decrepit creatures with some physical defect or the other, such as a chronic sore back, cracked sole, or corneal opacity; and, therefore, with few or no takers. As is evident from the height classification, no fresh elephants are coming to the *mela* - the source has dried up and the pool is shrinking every year.

Apart from elephant, the fair this year had horses and ponies 2384, camels 4, pedigree cows 4359, country- bred cows 672, and bullocks 42,005.

In the course of the *mela* some dealers picked up quite a few tuskers and female elephants, but there was no institutional buying, i.e. no government agency other than the West Bengal state Forest Department was in the market for purchase. West Bengal Forest Department paid around Rs.1,00,000 for each of the three prime female elephants they purchased, aged about 15 years each. Strangely, inflation does not seem to have effected the price of elephants; for even in 1987 West Bengal State Forest Department paid between Rs.90,000 and Rs.1,00,000 for each of the three elephant they had purchased. The asking price for the finest tusker in the *mela* was Rs.1,70,000, and the second best one with magnificent tusk was sold for Rs.1,40,000.

The Forest Department of Bihar has been running a camp office on the *mela* ground for the last 10 years - the first such office was set up in 1982. The attempt is to regularise the ownership and trade in elephant by an insistence that the private owners of elephants obtain legal procurement certificates (LPC) from the Forest Department before completing the sale or transfer. But a tradition of private ownership of elephants going back thousands of years, cannot be changed overnight, and even now the majority of the owners did not have LPCs. On November 1, 1991 the amended Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 of India came into force which removed an anomaly from the original Act as amended in 1977. In the first version of the Act elephant had been put in Schedule II, Part I and in the 'definition' (Chapter I, Selection 2) domesticated elephants were put in the category of 'cattle'. While in 1977 the elephant was upgraded to Schedule I to fall in line with Appendix I of CITES where the Asian elephants had been recently put, the 'definition' part was left unchanged. Thus, though the elephants were taken from the wild and domesticated, it could be claimed that once domesticated they did not come within the purview of the Act because they were cattle. A recent court judgement in Bihar had upheld this contention. However, the 1991 amendment has removed the anomaly and the whole category of cattle has been removed from the 'definition' part and replaced by 'livestock' where the mention of the elephant has been omitted. Thus, elephant now in law, whether wild or domesticated, will come unambiguously within the purview of Wildlife (Protection) Act. Hence, the LPCs for owners are now legally obligatory.

It was whispered in the *mela* ground that one mischievous buyer from outside the state, from western Uttar Pradesh in fact, was picking up old and big tuskers solely for the purpose of ivory, i.e. he would remove the elephants and then destroy them and obtain the ivory to sell it illicitly. The fellow was spurned by most traders in the *mela* and was called 'the butcher' in private. This is a police matter and the authorities are likely to take up the issue in due course when their attention is drawn to this heinous practice which has escaped notice so far as the incidents take place in private grounds outside the *mela* and in areas beyond the control of the Forest Depart-

ment. In fact, the international border with Nepal is not very far from where the *mela* is held, and it is more or less an open border. It seems possible that this ivory is smuggled out of the country along this route and eventually finds its way to the international market, particularly in south-east Asia and beyond. Sawn ivory has always been sold at Sonepur. Owners of tuskers recover some of their cost by selling off the sawn tips of the tusks of their animals when the 'show' is no longer necessary to enhance the price of the animal. One ivory dealer with an advertised presence was selling ivory and it was reported that the asking price was between Indian rupees 3,500 and 5,000 per kilogram. Another party informed one of us when approached incognito that he had a stock of 80 kilograms of ivory to offer to a likely buyer.

Is Sonepur *mela* an anachronism which has to wither away? This writer feels that the traders at Sonepur - most of them local small landowners keeping an elephant or two as symbol of social status during the year and making some profit in the following *mela*, if possible and buying a new one with the proceeds have a positive role to play. They take in small animals and bring them back as grown ups. The cost of maintaining young elephants in government stables is high - around Rs.1,500/- per month, whereas these people can do it practically free, feeding the animals with their farm produce and taking a personal care of the animals which is so sadly lacking in most (but not all) government establishments. This positive side of the much maligned traders at Sonepur needs to be clearly stated.

So much for elephant and ivory trade in Sonepur, 1991.

(For Sonepur mela, see D.K. Lahiri-Choudhury, 'The Indian Elephant in a Changing World', in *Contemporary Indian Tradition*, ed. Carla M. Borden, Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989).

(Note: 1 US$ = c.25 Indian rupees in November, 1991).

IS TRANSLOCATION A MANAGEMENT TOOL?

by : Mohd. Khan bin Momin Khan, Tajudin Abdullah Mustafa Abdul Rahman and B. Mohd. Nor.

PHILOSOPHY, PRINCIPLES AND CONCEPT OF MANAGEMENT

Man-nature interactions started when our food-gathering ancestors *(Homo erectus)* learned to hunt first by using their bare hands to improvise lethal and efficient weapons. Man also observed wildlife to acquire special skills and knowlegde to become a more effective hunter. At the same time our ancestors invented axe and saw to cut the pine and oak forest and make room for their settlements. The food-gathering society subsequently turned into prime consumers and commersialisation took place to support the human populations who were involved in other avocations.

As the *Homo sapiens* population experienced rapid growth and dispersed widely throughout the hemisphere, more resources were utilized by man and wildlife populations were gradually displaced from their natural habitats. Later man became highly mechanised; chain saws to cut the forest, tractors to till the farm and guns to kill the wildlife. Consequently, resources became scarce and wildlife species experienced massive extinction or rendered threatened or endangered.

Since 1600, a total of 194 species of mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians were extinct and 617 more species are threatened with extinction (Nilson 1983). In such a situation, the purist might take a *laisse-faire* attitude - if the resource is available and the species is destined to be extinct then let nature takes it's course. A strict naturalist, conservationist or environmentalist might take a near-religious approach - if it is good for the wildlife then the whole resources become untouchable. The sport hunter argues that the wildlife must be able to propagate in its natural habitats and the surplus need to be harvested. On the other hand, illegal hunters and poachers are attracted to the wildlife for the high value of the meat, horn or ivory. While commercial exploiter would argue that all resources must be able to serve the market economy to the maximum level without any regard to its future implications. Conversely, a utilitarian might look into the non-consumptive use of wildlife resources such as wildlife use in the tourism industry. Political leaders would exploit natural resources for self benefit or for his/her constituents. However, to a scientist or conservation biologist, resources can be put into productive use or extinction of species could be avoided or delayed by using our scientific knowledge, skill and experience to restore the species to recovery.

Whether we should interfere or not with the natural or unnatural ecological processes is rather a question of morality and ethics. It can either be taken as political, emotional or *practical solutions to real problems*. As a more successful and civilised species in the animal kingdom, are we duty-bound to help other species to coexist and utilise the same resources on this planet? Or do we need the wildlife and the wilderness they live in to be utilized wisely for our well being? It is more ethical to cull and eat wildlife than to kill and eat domestic animals?