



Man - Elephant Conflict a Study in Goalpara District of Assam

Daisy Rani
Talukdar

Freelance Researcher

Barsha Kalita

Assistant Professor, National Law University and Judicial Academy,
Assam Work done in Goalpara district of Assam, India

ABSTRACT

Human being has been adjusting him with the environment as well as destroying it while procuring food and attaining their shelter and other needs from their advent. Thus man started exploiting the nature to their maximum which ultimately resulted into a frequent conflict between man and the nature. Such a kind of man-nature conflict is not exception for the people of Goalpara district in Assam also. This region has been prone to man-elephant conflict. The present study has been conducted in order to assess and highlight the problems of man-elephant conflict particularly in the foothill region of the district. The study reveals that the natural habitat of elephants in the district is gradually decreasing due to massive deforestation and other anthropogenic activities like construction of roads, railways, extended human habitation etc. within the forest area. This has resulted in an increase in the number of victim as well as loss of property which has been limitless leaving the attacked villages completely paralysed.

KEYWORDS : conflict, ecological degradation, habitat, environment etc.

1.Introduction:

Fossil records indicate that from the Pleistocene period of geological time scale different Hominid races have distributed on this earth in accordance with certain dominating environmental factors and ultimately evolved the modern human race. Simultaneously with the appearance Homo Sapiens has been constantly adjusting itself to changing nature of the environment. He has to fight with natural obstacles to carve out his niche. Transformation of man into techno-man has aggravated the situation. The result is that a never ending conflict between man and nature has evolved threatening existence of both. The phenomenon of the conflict between man and elephant is also one of such conflict which needs urgent workable strategies for survival of both the species.

From Pre-historic time onwards man has to face the nature as challenge. He has to fight with natural obstacles to carve out its niche. Modern man has been making efforts to harness the natural resources to add to his comfort. The result is that the environment has not only been used but also been misused and abused, ultimately bringing an imbalanced nature to the forefront. Today nobody is secure and safe living in an age of catastrophe, calamity and scarcity. Now this insecurity has been felt not among the man folk, but all others living organisms. The result is very clear both man and the animals that used to coexist in a natural environment had to transform the same to a battle field just for survival and existence. The phenomenon of the conflict between wild elephants and man has been of recent origin which can be dated back to the middle of twentieth century. Such attacks have been common features in south Asian countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Burma and India (Assam and Kerala) (Discovery channel; Man v/s Wild). The elephant follow an ancient route from Indonesia to Bokakhat (Assam) through Burma. However, the extent of such man-elephant conflict has confined itself to pockets over the globe and used to be confined to, in and around sanctuaries and big forest covers, now they are inflicting to human habitat. The result is clear, smashed villages and a paralysed area. Media coverage is very limited though incidents are reflected occasionally e.g. Incidents of elephants killing five persons in Assam –Meghalaya Border (News Live, 24/04/09). Now, there is an increase in the rate of such incidents. More people are victimised by their infiltration to human habitat. The district goalpara, especially the foot hill region adjacent to the state of Meghalaya is a prone area to such man elephant conflict. More people are victimised and injured as well as huge amount of paddy, horticultural products and limitless other household properties have been destroyed in each year in the region. In this connection the present work has been initiated.

Super imposing the scope of development on the opportunity the

present study has been done aiming at evaluation of the pattern of man – elephant conflict in the district and analysing the history of elephant presence in the district. It has tried to include in it different aspects of man –elephant conflict and take into account the perceptions of the local people towards management of the problem. The study has tried not only to find the cause of the problem but also evaluate the effectiveness of the existing elephant control measures and work out strategies for awareness and conservation of elephant as well as forest in the region.

The district of Goalpara occupies a unique position amidst complex geological and physiographic makeup .The total area of the district is 1, 82,400 hectares of which 36,602 hectares are forest land. As per Assam Remote sensing Centre report (1993-2003) there has been considerable degradation of forest and has been expected to rise further by end of this decade. The current status of degraded forest is 5.27% (9610.00 hectares) of the total Geographical areas. Diminishing Forest has initiated the conflictual situation between man and Elephants.

Another significance of the study is the ever increasing population. According to the census report the population density is rising from 149/sq km in 1961 to 451/sq km in 2001.The growth rate is much higher than all Assam and national level. Such population growth certainly affects the natural resources leading to over exploitation of the forest for livelihood and habitat.

Thus due to massive destruction of the forest in the district habitat of the elephants has been disturbed by anthropogenic interference which has cost them with food and shelter insecurity. The result is that the elephants have to come down the hills to human habitat. Again, their ancient corridor has also been infiltrated by development activities. This has led to a land –resources competition between man and elephants which has further developed into human –elephant conflict.

Taking the above point in consideration a brief study has been initiated to workout a brief report on elephant research and conservation. The significance of the study lie in the fact that it tried to study the habitat pattern of the elephant and the changing pattern of the conflict for habitat by both the species.

2. Objectives of the study:

1. Highlight the problem of man elephant conflict in the region.
2. Draw the attention of respective authority for need based action on the problem.
3. Work out strategies for sustainable maintenance of harmonious relation between man and elephant for their co-existence.

3. Methodology and data base:

To fulfill the present study following methodologies have been adopted:

1. Physical survey has been conducted for collection of relevant information about conflict between man and elephant through questionnaires among elderly persons in 22 affected villages particularly in Borjhar Central forest area and Rongjuli forest area of Goalpara district.
2. Other information are collected from Secondary sources like district Gazettes ,census report ,Reports of Assam Report Sensing Application Centre (ARSAC),Assam statistical hand books, Assam and District – Village Dictionaries, journals , Newspapers, Television programs etc.

4. Study Area:

The district Goalpara is located within the longitude of 90° East to 91°15' East and the latitude of 25° 53' North to 26° 10'. The district Goalpara of Assam occupies a unique position amidst complex Geological and physiographic make up and stretches from the foothills of Meghalaya in the south to include the flood plains of the Brahmaputra in the North. The topography of the district constitute large old and new alluvium plain ,low range hills, series of wetlands and swamps, broken green landscapes of deciduous forest and green land together with dominating presence of the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries.

The study reveals that the degraded forest cover of the district has been recorded about 10480 hectares in 1989, about 4988 hectares in 1993 and 4610 hectares in 2003. As per provisional professional survey of Government of Assam (1999 – 2000); of the total area of the district (1, 82,400 hectares) of which 36,602 hectares are forests land (shown table – 1). However ,as per Assam Remote Sensing Centre Report(1993 – 2003) there has been considerable rate of destruction of forest which led to 2.73% of degraded forest in 1993 which increased to 5.27% in 2003 and is expected to rise further 2.54% of total Geographical area within this decade (shown in Table – 2). On the basis of such rate of degradation it is predicted that the forest cover of the district will be further degraded over 4622 hectares by the end of this decade which is 2.54% of total Geographical area. The present study has been conducted in two sectors of this district namely the Borjhar forest area under Dudhnoi Police Station within the central forest range and the Rongjuli forest range under Rongjuli Police Station. The Borjhar area occupies about 807sq km (D.F.O Office, Goalpara) comes under Northern Built up Zone (except chronic flood plain) and southern foothills Zone. It is surrounded by a number of villages like Raja Para, Bhojmala, Dabili, Dohela, Lela, Majakhili, Salpara, Guwabari, Silorbori etc. Similarly the Rongjuli forest area occupies about 16252.35 hectares is surrounded by large number of villages. Several villages are set up within the forest and reserve forest.

Other significant finding is the population growth rate of the district is found very high. According to the census report the population density is increasing from 149/sq km in 1961 to 451/sq km in 2001(Table – 3). This growth is much higher than the all Assam and national level. Such population growth certainly affects seriously the natural resources and over exploitation of forest for livelihood and habitat.

5. Analysis of the Problem:

Coming to the problem, due to massive destruction of forest in the district habitat of the elephants has been disturbed by anthropogenic interferences which has cost them with food and shelter. The gradual result is that the elephants have to come down the hills to human habitation. They use to come in two seasons - i.e. during (May – June) ripening of paddy. The study reveals that the elephants have an ancient route from foothills of Meghalaya (Bandershi, Barmatia, Moamari) passing through Borjhar and Uportola forest area till Khabari, Kanyakuchi to Khamar. They use Kanyakuchi jhar (forest) as their halting place and return back through the same route at a ½ km wide corridor. On their return journey they use Borjhar forest as their halting place. Now, the problem is new villages have settled within the forest (Borjhar Garopara: No evidence of its existence till 1981 census); may be due to internal migration or population exploitation. These villages comprise 100-200 houses. Nobody dared to enter into the forest due to its depth and presence of elephants that used to haunt

there for months in swampy areas. Another problem is that their track has been bifurcated by human activities like passing of NH-37 and N.F railways. Thus, human exploration into forestland made the elephants insecure. It is evident by the killing of elephant by train very often.

According to the view of the elderly inhabitants of the infringing villages the conflict between man – elephant have started after 1975, 3 elephants entered the villages for the first time but gradually this number has been in an increase to outnumber 90 – 100 elephants per herd in each season, specially in the last five years. Now, they come in herd in order to avoid scattering due to regular intrusion of human activities in their routes well as habitat. Again the native human inhabitants don't give a second thought while misusing the forest resources. They take forest resources as their native right. This has been exaggerated by involvement of mafia's in exploiting forest resources.

The ultimate consequences have been, there arise a frequent conflictual phenomena between man and elephant. The survey indicates that the surrounding villages have been facing destruction twice year since last decade. The situation is worst relatively in villages like Dabili, Guabari, Majakhali, Silorbori, and Borjhar Garopara. The agro based villages has to lose almost everything from homestead to agricultural products to other valuable assets, the cost of which sometime rises beyond 1,00,000 rupees per attack. Nearly 800-1000 bighas (100-125 hectares) agricultural land with paddy cultivation has been destroyed in each year since last two decades. The open agricultural land (without cultivation) are made non cultivable by their footprints as the foot prints are of 1 feet depth occasionally. The study indicates that the wild elephant damages several hectares of Rubber cultivation by uprooting to eat up its pulp in several infringing villages of both studied forest. Similarly in several villages under Rongjuli forest range the villagers of 21 villages have been suffering seriously from the regular seasonal attack of wild elephants. Generally a large herd of wild elephant come down from the neighbouring hills of Meghalaya and enter the infringing villages. Findings of the physical survey works of this paper it has been recorded that 7 people were victimised and 43 people were injured by wild elephant during the last 5 years. In addition to this large number of houses, plantation especially pineapple, banana, rubber, paddy and household properties are destroyed by elephant. Again due to their repetitive character they follow the same track and destroy same houses every year. Evidences show that several families of the concern villages had to leave their permanent homestead to clean up their track. Again, anybody who litter on their track, who tries to kill them who comes over while chasing will definitely get killed. The numbers of casualties are on rise .Every year 1-2(average) casualties are found as shown in (Table-4)

Thus it clarifies that elephant need their habitat back for survival. So they follow a simple rule 'let kill and live'.

6. Problems in a nutshell:

On the basis of the present investigation the problems of man –elephant encounter in the district may be concluded in a nut shell are as follows:

1. No evidences are found regarding prevention of man elephant conflict from respective authorities.
2. No long term policies have been adopted for prevention of man elephant conflict.
3. Villages themselves has to chase them away using search light, tins/drums etc. or wait till the elephants decamp themselves.
4. No forest authority comes forward to help either due to fear of life or fear of the villages who claims compensation.

7. Suggestions:

The problem of man elephant conflict has evolved due to man's own activities which they, had to solve themselves. Man should bear in mind that we are depended on nature but nature is not. So, we have to conserve it. So that need does not arise to face such challenges which threatened man –kind. For protection of mankind as well as elephant in the region following suggestions are forwarded to draw the attention of respective authorities for need full action.

- Sufficient plantation of Indigenous trees through public awareness should be conducted in degraded forest area.

- Borjhar Forest areas to be considered as protected forest area.
- Regular post Disaster survey and help be provided, both financially and medically for affected villages.
- Mafia groups are prohibited from destroying forest through legal actions.
- Gram Sabhas and PRI's be entrusted responsibility for curving out management mechanism for this disaster.
- Respective authorities, NGO's and learned people should come to forefront to such problem.

8. Conclusion:

In a nutshell, this problem of man-elephant conflict has evolved due to man's own foolishness and greedy nature, which has to be solved by them. Human should not forget that they are dependent on nature but nature is not. That is why human has to conserve it, so that need doesn't arise to face such challenges which threaten human-kind. For ten thousand years, civilisation has waged war on the living world. It turned the fertile Crescent into a desert, tore down china's forests and terraced its mountains, bled the Great Plains until all that remained was the Dust Bowl, and sparked a mass extinction the likes of which this planet has never seen. Now, the living world is beginning to fight back. Global warming, terrible storms, and worse have shown us the damage that the living world can do to our vaunted civilisation. The shock troops of this counter attack, though, could hardly be more ironic or appropriate: elephants. Elephants around the world have begun what seems almost like an all out war on human. So, the time has arrived that human get themselves equipped to survive in this war.

Table-1 represents a brief view of the forest coverage of the district.

Sl.no	Category	Areas in hectares	% of Total Geographical Area
1.	Built up land	523.00	0.28
2.	Forest		
	a. Deciduous	6019.00	3.15
	b. Forest Plantation	6845.00	3.48

Table - 2: Records of Degraded Forests in Goalpara District:

Year	Area in Hectares	% of degraded forest
1989	10480	5.48
1993	4988	2.73
2003	9610	5.2

Table -3: Population growth status of Goalpara district, Assam and India.

Year	India	Density (sq km)	Assam	Density (sq km)	Goalpara	Density (sq km)
1961	43,92,34,771	134	1,08,37,329	138	3,21,691	149
1971	54,81,59,652	177	1,46,25,152	186	4,64,185	215
1991	84,63,87,888	257	2,24,14,322	286	6,69,290	310
2001	102,70,15,247	324	2,66,38,407	340	9,73,709	451
2011	1,210,569,573	382	31169272	397	1,008,959	553

Table -4: Human Casualty, injured and approximate nos. of houses damaged by wild elephant recorded as per information given by the local villagers

Year	Casualty (Death)	Injured Nos.	Nos. House
1999	1	13	50
2003	2	17	120
2008	2	14	50
2009	1	18	48

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