



From the field

July 1st, 2016

Globetrotters of the Asian Elephant Society

It was an early morning in March that I found myself watching birds swooping in to catch fish in the large expanse of water in front of me. It was a water body, thousand acres in size and filled to the brim with water in summer! It was nothing short of a paradise for the myriad of insects, amphibians, reptiles, fish, birds and also a few elephants.

I could barely see the elephants though, playing and jostling in the mist-engulfed lake as they would, usually. The only way I was sure of their presence in the water was by the fresh tracks left behind when they moved into the lake, and the 'swish-swash' sounds they made while wading through knee-deep water. My binoculars and camera were of no use and I knew I had to wait till the sun was up and the mist had cleared for me to recognise who these elephants were.

It was not until 9 AM that my wait to see the elephants that I had been tracking along with the forest staff for many days and nights over a couple of years now, identifying each elephant and observing its behaviour, was interrupted by the distant voice of a child. I remembered that it was not a pristine jungle I was in, but actually a village lake surrounded by cropfields and human habitations with no forest in sight for many a mile, in Tumakuru district of southern Karnataka. The voice I heard was of a young local boy, my acquaintance from previous visits to his village in which the elephants stayed for long periods, regularly.

The boy was thrilled to see me and so was I; his was the only company I would have, while waiting long hours for the elephants to show up. He was excited at the prospect of watching elephants today through my binoculars and appreciating them better; he too had begun recognizing them and would often identify them by their names! I heard the boy asking his mother in excitement, "*Amma, anna bandaithae, aadre evatthu aanenae illavalla. Mattae anna yake bandaithae?*" ('Mother, the elephant observer has come, but the elephants are not here today. Then why is he here?') His mother replied, "*Aane-anna bandidrae, aanenu bandirthawae.*" ('If he has come, then the elephants would have come too.') I could sense the disappointment in her voice on realizing that I was there, as it meant bad news for the farmers in the area. Her concern was very understandable. When the elephants come into a village lake, they stay for several days while feeding from crops in the surrounding villages at night. This results in immense damage to farmers' crops and property, and accidental casualties when people and elephants cross paths. It is a risk too high for people who are not used to having lived with elephants for centuries, to come to terms with.



A banana plantation after being fed upon by elephants

The mist cleared, but the elephants were still out of sight, hidden by the thick growth of the Pink Morning Glory plant. A common fresh water weed plant, *Ipomea carnea*, had spread from one lake to another, through the numerous interconnected canals. Hardly any palatable plant species grew in the deep waters of the lake anymore, other than the occasional water lily in the clearing. The sounds of the elephants had ceased too, were they already sleeping? *They must have had a long night. Were they really there or had I misinterpreted the signs and sounds?* While I was drowned in my thoughts, the boy and his mother had lost interest and were at the edge of the waterbody, washing the bundle of clothes they had brought with them from home. The boy would frequently look up at the expanse of water, hoping to catch a glimpse of the phantom elephants and then look at me disapprovingly. My reputation as the pied-piper of elephants and harbinger of bad news to the village was at stake! But I knew my behavioural predictive models were working well, they had excellent success in terms of accuracy of prediction, even at the level of the individual elephant and I was banking on it. If there is one thing the elephants have taught me over these years, it is to be patient. I knew it was a matter of time before I saw them. If not today then tomorrow, I was ready to wait.

The sun was directly over our heads by now, and it was getting too hot to even sit in the shade of the stunted pongamia tree at the edge of the lake, let alone wash clothes under the blazing sun. Just as I began to wonder how the elephants in this waterbody, with little or no shade and food, managed without feeding for up to 14 hours a day (unlike their wild cousins who fed for nearly 18 hours), I heard a big 'swoosh' come from the lake. The elephants were on the move again. They had just blown water from their trunk and would come out of the *Ipomea* growth and into the clearing any minute. And then, with a calm and gentle gait, so unique to an elephant, Mak the makhana, emerged from the deep channel in which he had been resting along with his comrades. We were overjoyed to see the elephants, but I was also relieved that the predictive model held its own once again, while being able to give us more insights into the decision-making process of the elephants in a complex, rapidly changing ecological and anthropogenic setting.



My young friend and the elephants

Mak was followed by four other elephants, all males, of different ages. The boy exclaimed in joy, "*hennu aane!*" ('a female elephant!'). He had made the common mistake that most of us do when we see a tuskless bull, since only female Asian Elephants are known to be tuskless. I was quick to explain to him that all the elephants we were watching were males and that the largest fellow in the 'boy scout' was a tuskless male and the others were his long term associates. *But, why were they all males? Aren't male elephants supposed to be solitary? Don't female elephants live in groups?*, came a series of questions from my very excited friend, who had read up on elephants by now. This was exactly why I was studying these elephants too, to answer the very same questions and perhaps a few more and I did not know all the answers yet.



Mak, followed by Sam, emerge from the *Ipomea* and into the clearing to feed on water lily

Adult male Asian Elephants are known to be solitary beings, often called the Lone Bull or *Onti-Salaga* (in Kannada). They are known to associate with female-led groups when in *Musth*. Otherwise, they lead a solitary life, ranging far and wide in search of food and water. The young males drift away from their family groups/natal herds around the age of 15 years to associate briefly with peers, and live a solitary life thereafter. The young females however, continue to live in large extended matriarchal societies in herds and clans. Adult male elephants are also known to form groups of size two-to-four with other males, mostly while raiding crops. My observations of male Asian elephants in fragmented and human-dominated landscapes (potentially risky areas) were only adding to this well-documented behaviour. Very often, the bull groups were misidentified as family groups by the locals due to the presence of *makhana*s' in them.



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The bull group socializing at the lake, with Mak keeping a watch



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A bull group with a Makhana, often mistaken for a female

But why do elephants range in these risky areas, far away from their known habitats or forests? The region around Tumakuru and many other areas have witnessed a tremendous change in land-use over the last decade. Once a dry land, best suited for dry-land agriculture such as coconut cultivation, Tumakuru is now a transformed region more akin to the *Malnad* of the Western Ghats than the flatbeds of *Bayalu Seemae*.

Crops such as arecanut, banana, mango, paddy and ragi abound this region and can be found throughout the year. The region scores high on the soil irrigability index as well. This change in agricultural practice has been possible due to the numerous borewells that have been dug in the region and more importantly due to the Hemavathi river water which is channeled to fill the water bodies in the area, even in summer, for irrigation purposes. The increase in the frequency of visitation by and duration of stay of elephants in Tumakuru district correlates with the influx of water from Hemavathi through its canal network, making this region a nutritionally rich and productive landscape, especially for the male elephants.

Male Asian and African elephants are known to raid crops more often than their female counterparts. They are known to adopt a high-risk, high-gain strategy. The crop-raiding males may gain a reproductive advantage over non-crop raiding bulls by benefiting from feeding on nutritious crops, thereby increasing their body size. This, however, makes them vulnerable to accidental and retaliatory killings and hence is a risky strategy. The male elephants I had been observing had to make their way across highways, railway tracks, innumerable electric power lines, and risk being chased and shot by people in order to reach the productive regions of Tumakuru. But it may still be too dangerous for the female elephants and their calves to explore. This behaviour is not limited to Tumakuru alone. Increasingly, across elephant range areas, elephants seem to be adapting to the changes in local ecological and anthropogenic settings by exhibiting remarkable behavioural plasticity, including modifying their own sociality in order to persist in highly modified landscapes.

I could see that two of the younger males, Sam and Tintin, had picked up a quarrel and were busy settling scores. Tintin was slightly older than Sam, but the latter was a close associate of the older, more dominant bull, Mak, and would not budge. But Tintin, being bigger and stronger, was giving his opponent a tough time. Their tussle carried on for many hours late into the evening. It was dusk by the time Tintin had established his dominance over Sam, but not before being reprimanded by Mak soon after they got back to the group. It was time. The sun was setting, the elephants were getting restless and seemed ready for another night of globetrotting in the human-dominated landscape. While little is known about the existence of all-male groups in Asian elephant societies, the life-history strategies that males adopt or the decision-making mechanisms involved therein have never been explored.



Tintin and Sam in a tussle

My young friend had stayed with me, skipping his homework, even after being shouted at by his mother, (It was a Sunday and he had to be ready for school the next day). I could not help but feel guilty. I wondered whether I was a bad influence on him, at an age when he should be studying in order to get into the rigors of modern day life and not be a wanderer like me? The thought was disturbing, so I asked my friend to return home as it was getting dark. On our way, I asked him as to why he had stayed the whole day. To which he said, "*Aane bagge thilkondu, naanu friendsgella naalae helthini.*" ('I will learn about the elephants and tell my friends at school tomorrow.') I smiled at him and wondered

whether the next time we would be a larger group, watching the elephants, with all his friends!



Mak giving Tintin a head-up, ears-out stare while establishing dominance

After driving him home, while returning to join the forest department teams for conflict mitigation activities, I could see the five bulls, walking majestically beside each other across a fallow land under the high-tension wire, and fade into the darkness toward an unknown destination, like true explorers of the elephant society.

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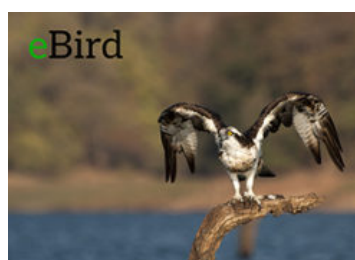


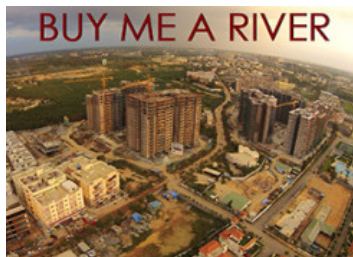
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Nishant Srinivasaiah is interested in understanding behavioral decision-making in elephants. He is currently pursuing his doctoral studies on the behavioral ecology of Asian Elephants at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore. This study is a collaborative effort under the Frontier Elephant Programme (FEP).

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