

## CONTRIBUTED PAPER

# Adivasi (Tea Tribe) worldviews of living close to wild Asian elephants in Assam, India

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**Article impact statement:** Engaging with local concepts of living alongside wild Asian elephants can provide unique, socioecologically just conservation opportunities.

## Funding information

Idea Wild; Inlaks Shivdasani Foundation; Rufford Foundation, Grant/Award Number: 31668-1

## Abstract

In Assam state, northeastern India, human–elephant conflict mitigation has included technocentric measures, such as installation of barriers, alternative livelihoods, and afforestation. Such measures treat conflict as a technical problem with linear cause–effect relations and are usually ineffective over the long term because they do not consider how historical conditions have shaped present interactions between humans and elephants. Human–elephant encounters in South Asia, including in Assam, have arisen from colonial and postcolonial land-use policies, ethnic relations, and capital extraction. To disentangle these relations, we conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Udalguri district of Assam among the Adivasi (Tea Tribe) to examine their interactions with wild elephants. Through socioecological ruptures, caused by displacement and deforestation, Adivasi (Tea Tribe) and elephant lives have intersected through space and time. Adivasi (Tea Tribe) life narratives and observations of daily encounters with elephants revealed that their interactions are multifaceted and motivated by multiple factors. Myths and oral testimonies revealed that the community has created conceptualizations of the elephant by closely observing their behavior, especially their movements, diets, vocalizations, and interactions with humans. These conceptualizations are filled with vignettes of shared marginalized lives, caused by the loss of homeland, food poverty, and uncertain ways of living. The empathy, expressed by the Adivasi (Tea Tribe), highlights ways of living with elephants that are affective and reach beyond technocentric interventions. For Adivasi (Tea Tribe) members, cohabitation could thus be achieved by living close to elephants as uneasy neighbors. Concepts of cohabitation, we suggest, could be harnessed to inform conservation policy and bring into focus the critically important—and yet often underutilized—values, encompassed by bottom-up, place-centric understandings of what elephants are and how coexistence may be possible in increasingly anthropogenic landscapes.

## KEYWORDS

Adivasi, Asian elephant, Assam, coexistence, conflict, India, Tea Tribe

## INTRODUCTION

Human–wildlife interactions now constitute an important natural and social science research area. The Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) has captivated researchers owing in part to its frequent interactions with humans in shared spaces and over time (Banerjee & Sinha, 2023a; Sukumar, 2003). Using tools from behavioral ecology, ethology, and physiology, the nat-

ural scientists have attempted to comprehensively determine the organismic biology of elephants (Sukumar, 2003) without considering the social processes of humans with whom elephant populations interact regularly and build complex relations. The social sciences have begun to employ ethnographies and interviews to investigate how sociopolitical stratifications can affect the lives and livelihoods of human communities that coexist with elephants, but with the latter being marginal-

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ized mainly as controllable objects (Barua, 2014a; Walker, 2005).

Both disciplines have compartmentalized the complexity of human–elephant relations, possibly for ease of understanding, into a binary of conflict and coexistence, with conflict mostly being understood in terms of physical and socioeconomic damage to both species and coexistence, meaning such damage is either absent or constrained within tolerable limits (Nyhus, 2016). This binary is challenged by the argument that conflict and coexistence are multifaceted and spread over a continuum and could often even be considered an integral part of one another (Banerjee & Sinha, 2023b; Barua, 2014a, 2014b; Bhatia, 2021; Hill, 2021; Keil, 2017; Lainé, 2016; Münster, 2016; Schroer, 2021).

Barring these recent reflections, however, the conflict–coexistence binary persists strongly. Arguably, this binary is useful from the perspective of management of human–elephant interactions, where conflict is to be minimized or otherwise acted on to reach the goal of coexistence (Frank et al., 2019; Madden, 2004; Nyhus, 2016). This has become critically important because crop foraging and movement through human habitations are on the rise across the range of Asian elephants. Their habitats and migratory routes are becoming increasingly fragmented, degraded, or lost to anthropogenic infrastructural and agricultural expansion, mining, monoculture plantations, and human migration (Leimgruber et al., 2003; Padalia et al., 2019). Across Asia, some elephant populations have adapted to foraging on human-grown crops, which are plentiful and nutritious (Lenin & Sukumar, 2011; Pokharel et al., 2019; Sukumar, 2003; Wilson et al., 2015).

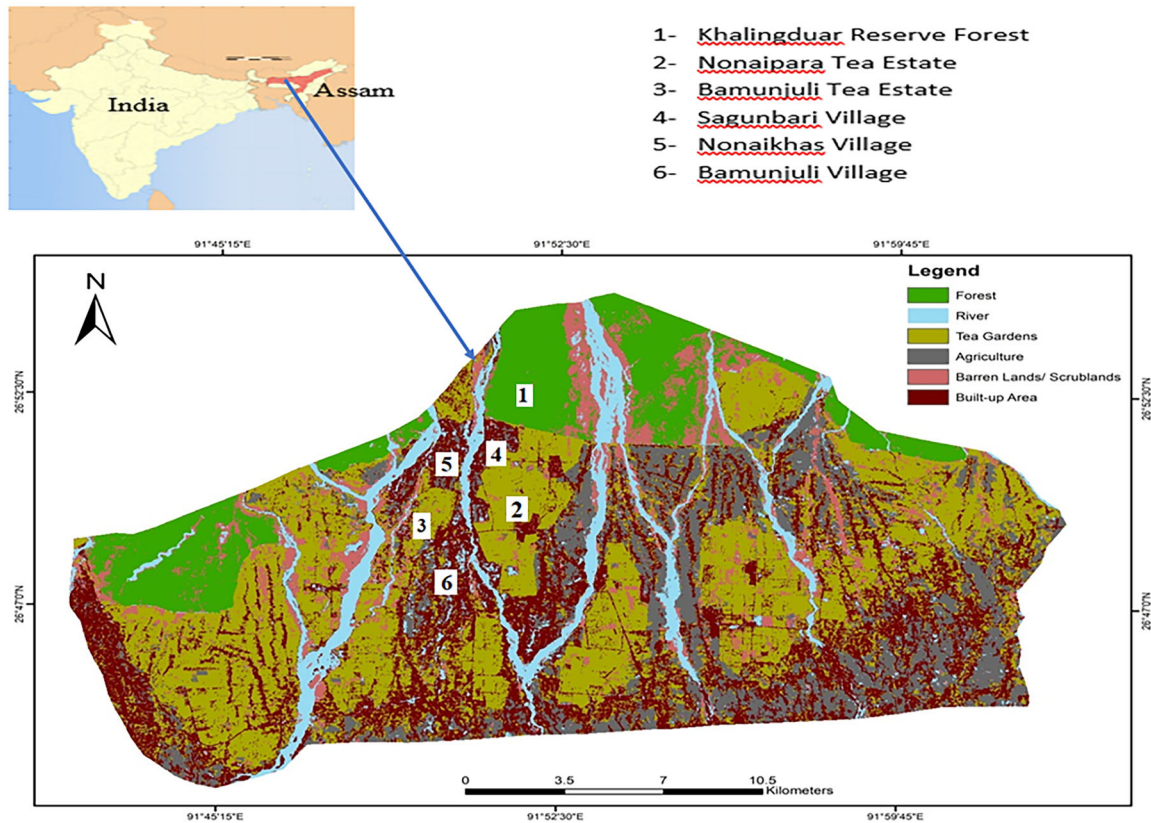
People's tolerance of wild elephants could also emerge from within the realms of conflict. Recollections of conflict and their communication across a human community could shape the collective and individual tolerance of species, such as the Asian elephant, over time (Gogoi, 2018). This tolerance is also influenced by an individual human's or a community's perception of danger and vulnerability, which, in turn, is often influenced by the nature of the species concerned (Nyhus, 2016) and a number of sociopolitical factors, including age, gender, land ownership, income level, political representation, coping strategies, and even community structure (Lenin & Sukumar, 2011). In India, severe damage from wildlife has hidden, often-unrecognized effects on people that are frequently prolonged, psychological, and especially harmful to marginalized groups, such as women (Barua et al., 2013; Jadhav & Barua, 2012; Ogra, 2008). Conflict also makes people more vulnerable (Banerjee & Sharma, 2021).

To reduce conflict and ensure coexistence, predominant interventions have largely been technocentric, including building infrastructure to physically separate humans and elephants and creating alternative livelihoods (for an overview of such measures, see Hoare [2015] and Shaffer et al. [2019]). These measures are formulaic and based on the assumption that human–elephant conflict is a technical problem, the logic of which is embedded in linear cause–effect relations. Although the effectiveness of such interventions has been discussed (Enekwa, 2017; Fernando et al., 2008; Gunaryadi et al., 2017),

these are short-term interventions, aiming at best to reduce damage to both species, but they fail to affect the root causes of the problem. Depending on the site, such causes are embedded in political economy and could include unsustainable capital expansion-led deforestation in growth-centric economic models, militarization, and interethnic conflict, as well as uneven socioeconomic development (de Silva & Srinivasan, 2019; Fletcher & Toncheva, 2021). Thus, simple conceptualizations of conflict, involving different kinds of damage and formulation of strategies to minimize conflict and promote coexistence, only obfuscate the history and politics of unique human–elephant relations prevalent in particular regions (Barua, 2014a; Evans & Adams, 2018; Münster, 2016). This simplistic binary categorization also limits the visibility of particular ways of coexistence, within which humans, elephants, and inanimate objects (e.g., fences or torchlights) get entangled to order or reorder human–nonhuman lives and landscapes (Barua, 2014b; Evans & Adams, 2018).

This recent ‘more-than-human’ turn in the social sciences and humanities has also prompted interdisciplinary researchers of nonhuman species to look for meaning in the species' surroundings, including human interactions (Lorimer et al., 2019; Sinha et al., 2021), thus promoting the active incorporation of animal practices of building relations through exertion of agency and decision-making into the social sciences (Barua & Sinha, 2019; Bear, 2011). Asian elephants have a notable niche in such scholarship owing to their long interrelated history with humans. Explorations of the shared lives of humans and elephants have thus led to new insights into interspecies interactions and relatedness, which are rooted in mutually shared experiences (Barua, 2014a; Keil, 2017; Lainé, 2016; Locke, 2013; Münster, 2016). Drawing inspiration from this scholarship and recommendations by Margulies and Bersaglio (2018) and by de Silva and Srinivasan (2019) on integrating the effects of the existing power asymmetries in human society on interspecies relations, we attempted to engage with the concepts and concerns of the Adivasi (Tea Tribe) (A/TT) community of Assam, northeastern India, because they cohabit and cocreate their lives with wild elephants. We have shortened and combined the names Adivasi and Tea Tribe to A/TT because the community members use both terms as identifiers in different political contexts. The entangled lives of A/TT and elephants remain embedded in a multispecies, more-than-human, and political contact zone—a natural-cultural ecotone—where the two species “end up meeting and integrating with one another...in the most unusual of ways” (Haraway, 2007; Natarajan & Sinha, 2022, p. 195).

We examined how members of the A/TT community perceive lives and actions of wild elephants and formulate ways of living alongside them. We described the lifeworlds of A/TT and the elephants in their shared landscape and considered how the nature of the encounters between elephants and the A/TT has been shaped by colonial and postcolonial political ecologies. We also explored the different ways A/TT members conceptualize living alongside elephants and synthesized our understandings to derive meaning from the A/TT narratives of living with elephants.



**FIGURE 1** A land-use land-cover map of the study region in Udalguri district of Assam state indicating the study villages and tea estates.

## METHODS

### Study area

This study was conducted in a landscape mosaic of tea estates of varying sizes, agricultural settlements, river channels and riverine areas, and forested tracts around the Khalingduar Reserve Forest of Udalguri district (26°46' N, 92°08' E) in Assam, India (Figure 1). Fieldwork was carried out in the villages and tea estates within 10 km of the reserve forest boundary. The agricultural settlements consisted of paddy fields, bamboo groves, small tea farms, and areca nut (*Areca catechu*) farms.

Elephants regularly reside in and move through this human-dominated landscape for approximately 9 months of the year (April–December), leading to extensive elephant–human interactions. Such interactions typically occurred over an area of 500 km<sup>2</sup>, encompassing approximately 80 villages and 10 tea estates and including the home range of about 150 elephants (Assam Forest Department, 2009). Rapid deforestation, forest and grassland degradation, primarily during the ethnopolitical Bodoland Movement of 1990–2005 (Mahato et al., 2021), and the subsequently altered elephant behavioral patterns, as observed by our respondents, have been postulated as the cause of intense elephant-related damage in the region.

Subsistence farming, tea estate work, and other nonfarm daily-wage-based work are the major livelihood options avail-

able to the A/TT, Bodo, and Nepali communities, who comprise the 3 primary ethnic groups in the area. The A/TT are the largest group, despite the Bodo being classified as a scheduled tribe by the state and representing the most sociopolitically dominant community across the district (Behera, 2017; Directorate of Census Operations Assam, 2011). Although the villages in the study region were typically multiethnic and multi-religious, including Hindus, Christians, and Muslims, the tea estates were generally dominated by the A/TT and consisted of Hindu and Christian families. The numerical dominance of the A/TT and our own observations of their frequent encounters with elephants at different places (home, farmland, tea estate) led us to focus on this community and their lifeworlds.

### Situating A/TT and elephant lives in Udalguri

After occupying Assam in 1826, the British forcibly dispossessed the Indigenous peasantry of their land to establish tea plantations (Behal, 2014; Guha, 1977; Sharma, 2011). Requiring an intensive labor force, the British uprooted thousands of tribal and nontribal rural people from central and eastern India and brought them to the tea estates of Assam (Behal, 2014). The racial, colonial, capitalist venture of the tea plantation worked through the logic of subordinating people to produce cheap labor and dispossession of their bodies, histories, and



homelands (Behal, 2014; Bharadwaj, 2021; Sumesh & Gogoi, 2021). Despite this colonial legacy, present-day tea plantation workers' socioeconomic profiles have not improved significantly; health care and education are poor, and a lack of social mobility persists (Banerji & Willoughby, 2019). At our field site in Udalguri, where tea estates have been functioning since the late 19th century, the situation of the A/TT community is representative. Although some A/TT members have moved to villages, either buying land or encroaching on state-owned land, economic constraints have forced many to continue working as temporary plantation laborers. One of our respondents, Budhan Orang, thus concluded, "What should we do? There is no other way. We have to farm to generate the rice for the home. For the rest of our expenses, we have to work on the plantation and crush stones by the river." This revelation and an emphasis on *there is no other way* point to the ubiquitous presence of a "need economy" (Sanyal, 2007).

Elephants were a significant part of imperial operations in Assam (Saikia, 2011) as "forest produce" (their capture led to increased revenue); as "worker" infrastructure in the expansion of colonial, capitalist, timber-based industries; and as a threat to the regime through damage inflicted on tea plantations and agricultural crops, which reduced revenue. The widespread capture and killing of elephants in Assam, coupled with the expansion of tea industries, led to significant violence against elephants and their societies. Following the British exploitation of the forests of Assam, however, the postcolonial era maintained the prevalent forest management system and adhered to the earlier colonial production forestry policies (Saikia, 2011).

Even though some forests were reserved for wildlife conservation, there has been an overall loss of forest in Assam since independence (Lele & Joshi, 2009). This occurred primarily due to expansion of extractive industries, high rates of population movement to and around forested areas, land distribution among the landless, government encouragement of agriculture to grow more food crops, and an overall rise in the number of immigrants (Sharma et al., 2012). The severe loss, degradation, and fragmentation of Assam's forests led to the displacement of local elephant populations, forcing them to forage on food crops, the mainstay of local communities (Saikia, 2011). Udalguri district has become emblematic of this situation over the last 3 decades. Describing the situation here, one of our respondents, Dipen, a 43-year-old livestock herder, stated,

...the forest used to be so big. Elephants were present at that time...but they did not cause much damage. Then, the terrorists cleared the forest and hacked precious trees. Slowly, the elephants started to feed on paddy and destroy houses... Now, elephants do not live in the forest. They roam around the village and the plantation. Germany-lota [*Lantana camara*] is now everywhere. Even my cows do not get anything to eat.

Faced with a set of tripartite restrictions, imposed through monoculture plantations, deforestation of their native habitats (Mahato et al., 2021), and the uncontrolled growth of invasive,

nonfood plant species (Nath et al., 2019), the elephants in our study area perhaps also have no other way other than to live off the resources available in tea estates, agricultural fields, and homesteads. What then remains unquestionable is that the concept of a need economy can also perhaps now extend to the elephants because they labor hard to meet their basic survival needs through drastic individual and societal adjustments. The study of A/TT and elephant life in Assam's colonial and postcolonial ecologies thus reveals the social ruptures that these communities experienced as they became laborers in racial, colonial, and capitalist endeavors surrounding the tea estates.

## Fieldwork

Ethnographic fieldwork was carried out for 16 months (August 2021 to December 2022) in 3 villages—Sagunbari, Bamunjuli, and Nonaikhash Basti—and at 2 tea estates—Nonaipara and Bamunjuli—all situated within 0–7 km of the Khalingduar Reserve Forest. These villages and tea estates are representative—demographically and in intensity of elephant visitation—of all the villages and tea estates where elephant-related interactions occur in the region.

Following Lestel et al.'s (2006) ideas of ethnoethnology and ethnoethnology, immersing ourselves into the rural life of the study area and observing the different facets of life of the local people and elephants were the key ethnographic methods of our study, similar to Baynes-Rock (2013), Lainé (2016), Barua and Sinha (2019), and Colombino and Bruckner (2023). We engaged in village life, particularly in elephant-related activities such as farming, cattle grazing, water collection, crop and house guarding, solar fence installation, tea plucking, elephant watching, elephant drives, and village meetings. Active participation and unstructured, contextualized conversations with individuals or groups enabled their spontaneous perspectives to emerge. We also observed elephant behaviors opportunistically and documented them in a descriptive manner, creating detailed behavioral profiles related to movement, foraging, feeding, and intra- and interspecies interactions. We used these descriptions as context in talking with A/TT members about their perspectives.

We conducted semistructured interviews with A/TT groups and individuals in the villages and tea estates. They provided us with insights into people's social, economic, and political lives; their past experiences with elephants; and their perspectives on elephant lives in general and on certain behaviors in particular (Appendix S1). We conducted 20 such group interviews, 8 in the tea estates and 12 in the villages (110 A/TT members interviewed). The respondents were chosen in 2 stages, and the criteria for selection was that they should have had direct long- or close-range interactions with wild elephants. In the first stage, based on our initial visits and contacts established, 20 A/TT individuals—8 and 12 from the tea estates and villages, respectively—were chosen purposively as nodes for these interviews. These members then, through snowball sampling, requested 4–5 more A/TT members to participate in each interview. Through this sampling approach, we have sought

to determine only the quality and depth of A/TT–elephant relations rather than make population-level inferences.

Our study was designed according to the protocols regarding engagement with human subjects as specified by the Institutional Ethics Committee of National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru, and we received ethical clearance from the committee. We summarized the research objectives and the relevant ethical practices (e.g., use of interviewee data, rights of interviewees, confidentiality) to the participants before each interview and obtained their verbal consent. On receiving informed consent, we conducted the interviews in either Assamese or Hindi, whichever language was chosen by the participants. The interviews were typically 60- to 120-min long. Audio recordings of interviews were made with the permission of the participants and stored in a password-protected computer. The interviews were transcribed and translated into English and analyzed to examine people's daily lives around elephants, elephant behavior, causes of damage, and potential measures to mitigate such damage. These themes were further analyzed alongside our field notes to determine possible causal linkages. In attributing quotes to participants, we used pseudonyms instead of people's real names. Due to length restrictions, we supply only quotations translated into English rather than the original Assamese or Hindi.

## RESULTS

In the narrative descriptions of A/TT worldviews on elephants, we included the multimodal contours of the occasionally tangible and sometimes affective and yet multisensory encounters between elephants and the A/TT communities. We also considered how these variously sensed narratives about elephants gave rise to accounts of shared marginalization and mutual adaptation and finally to a speculative sense of a shared, uncertain future. Although most respondents initially described incidents of elephant damage, a deeper engagement often led to their simply described encounters elevating themselves to narratives of rich visual–auditory–olfactory texture. Such perceptions, we believe, can only emerge when people become sensitive and sensible observers and active participants of elephants' lives (Banerjee & Sinha, 2023b).

### Narratives of elephants

Our A/TT interlocutors preferred to address elephants as *baba* (father/guardian), *maharaj* (king/benefactor), *bbogobaan* (god), or *maalik* (owner) instead of the simple *haathi*, the vernacular term for elephant, thereby significantly placing elephants on a superhuman pedestal. Geeta Tanti, a 39-year-old woman, stated,

The way the Maharaj controls us, we have to live accordingly. It is true that they have caused problems in my house and paddy field, but I also believe that whatever I have achieved is because of their blessings.

Such beliefs served to extend the apparent godliness of elephants, usually manifest in the form of the Hindu elephant-headed deity Ganesha, to the realm of family, wherein the elephant became the guardian of the house. Many A/TT farmers also claimed to leave a portion of their produce in the paddy field itself as an offering to the elephants because they have the first right of access to the harvest, having been present before humans arrived and thus being the rightful owners of the land.

Amit Kharia, a man, aged 42 years, said,

I like it when elephants are around. People work so much in the plantation during the daytime and after the work is over, they go to watch elephants. That is a daily enjoyment ... The elephants and people play together. When the night descends, people come back to their houses. If the elephants do not come, it is boring... It is only when elephants come that we have fun.

Amit's observation—"...play together"—basically consisted of people with crackers running behind elephants, who frantically ran around or mock-charged people. This was an everyday affair in the plantation. Elephants became part of A/TT leisure tropes and broke the monotony of the invariable human wake–work–eat–sleep–repeat protocol of the estates.

The A/TT community believed elephants to be bearers of immense "knowledge" and "patience," far greater than that of humans. Ruby Karmakar, a 32-year-old, woman plantation worker, said,

I always think of how they keep so calm. When we pluck tea leaves, they keep standing in another section and calmly see us working. They never have harmed us during our work. When we go to the forest to collect firewood, they never harm us... They sometimes raise their trunks to greet us. They know who has committed sins. If you have not committed a sin, they will never harm you. If you utter bad words to them, they will surely harm you in some way.

Such beliefs also helped community members rationalize why elephants damaged their crops or houses or how such a superior knowledge bearer could sense and know the virtues and values upheld by particular human beings.

Beyond the emotive considerations of elephants, people often sensed them affectively. Close-range encounters in the night, when the capacity of the human senses to comprehend elephants was typically compromised, necessitated elephants to be understood through their sudden, unexpected movements and a myriad of characteristic sounds. A sudden thud of a wall being broken or a large, dark moving object at the window or at the door often became affective initiators of a nocturnal encounter. The A/TT members often claimed a cold wind blew over them to announce the arrival of elephants—a warning sign from the elephants for people sleeping or guarding crops—and one had to be sensitively attuned to it. Disturbed vegetation,

footprints, or dung piles, in turn, also became valid semiotic indicators of unobserved elephants.

Rather than human deaths, injuries, or other damage, the A/TT community often felt overwhelmed by what the elephants could have done but decided not to do. Deepali Sawra, a 27-year-old woman, exclaimed,

It is such a large living being! If they wanted, they could have destroyed the village in one night. They have never done that. People have accidentally got very close to elephants so many times but they were not killed.

Such close-range encounters were thus more often about the blessed survival of people, under the gracious consideration of the baba.

Our A/TT respondents occasionally attributed elephantine crop or house damage to activities or the inactivity of the local Forest Department. The elephant was then no longer a friendly spirit or family member but a controllable beast. Several individuals suggested,

The foresters should take these elephants to the forest. What can I do with the elephants? They are the government's animals and it should look after them.

They also expressed far greater frustration with the Forest Department than with the elephants and complained that the former neither took care of the people nor the elephants and their forests. Several of our respondents then affirmed that these elephants were not “bad” but should be taken care of so as not to inflict such damage. These particular elephants were often referred to as *okora* (disobedient), *pogola* (mad), *dushto* (evil), or even *ugropontbi* (insurgent).

The elephants thus towered over the A/TT community in multiple forms, occasionally as emotively invoked friends or benevolent guardians of their welfare, sometimes sensed as a dark, malevolent presence, possibly controllable by failing human agency, but always as steadfast companions and fellow travelers through life.

## Narratives of shared marginalization

Almost all our A/TT respondents brought the elephants from the domain of being charming or godly to that of material reality when we interrogated them about why they thought elephants behaved differently in or around human habitations from how they behaved in the forests, the human-designated “animal place” for these beings (Philo & Wilbert, 2000). Most A/TT members, both women and men, responded with their accounts of the unusual ways of elephants in the plantation: “Where will they go? What will they eat? There is nothing in the forest. There is no other way for them.” The last statement was repeated on several occasions and in different contexts, often by A/TT members of relatively low socioeconomic status when

referring to social mobility, the boundedness of plantations, or participation in the need economy. The colonial and postcolonial ecologies, which have directly produced the present-day A/TT lives, also appear to have affected the lives of elephants, rendering them confined to rather different ways of being.

Among the A/TT communities, poverty—especially of food and time—is widespread. An overwhelming majority of the respondents thus spoke,

They have such large stomachs! And, for us, it is so small. For me, my hunger is satisfied with some quantity of rice. For them, they have to eat so much. I am laboring so hard out of hunger; I pluck leaves, farm, raise cows and goats, break stones by the river and work for daily wages. Elephants have such great hunger; you should think how much work they will need to do.

Here, the elephants became fellow laborers, members of another marginalized group, struggling for survival. Although the A/TT members toiled hard in the daytime, the elephants became workers in the night, moving endlessly through the plantations and by the rivers. This rather unusual behavior of the familiar elephants, so different from that of elephants in the forests, was thus normalized through a sense of shared marginalization of being economically and nutritionally poor.

Our A/TT interlocutors, however, did not resort to divinity or destiny-centric arguments to account for such marginalization, both of themselves and of elephants. Some A/TT members raised issues of historic injustice in the plantations and their status as other from the dominant Assamese–Bodo community to account for the continuation of their poverty and powerlessness. On the issue of deforestation at the study site, the A/TT respondents rejected the idea that they, as a community, were primarily responsible for destroying the forests and suggested that this happened due to the activities of unscrupulous non-A/TT individuals from elsewhere who profited from deforestation-led timber smuggling. Several of our interlocutors also asked us, “Have you ever found any excessively rich Adivasi or tea worker, who has bought houses and cars with the money that they have earned by cutting down trees?” Such deforestation, according to them, was behind the violence that the elephants have witnessed and which triggered them to move into and predominantly forage in the plantations; they had nowhere else to go or feed.

## Narratives of mutual adaptability

Even though the concept of a shared marginalization brought the A/TT and elephants together, both physically and metaphorically, there appeared to be a limit to such proximity. A 40-year-old man, Roushan Horo, said,

When the elephant is in the plantation, there is no problem. But when it enters the house or is in the paddy field, it creates a problem. I feel so

frightened. How do I run my life if this keeps on happening? They can move as per their wish but they do not have to come inside the house. They can feed on rice in the field but some accident might happen if they enter our houses.

Thus, even though the A/TT members were extremely considerate of elephant presence outside the forests, the limits to such consideration became evident when personal possessions and resources, including their homes and crops, were affected. There were mental limitations as well. Among the various emotive entanglements with elephants, fear and anxiety appeared to be the most predominant and persistent emotions expressed.

Such liminal constraints on the acceptance of coexistence also led to various processes of colearning and coadaptation, evident among the A/TT and the local elephant communities. Reflecting on whether the elephants of present times were different from those of previous times, Hari Behera, a 36-year-old man, said,

The way people have changed, the elephants have changed accordingly. In earlier times, elephants used to run away when we used to just light a fire. After that, we started using torchlights. Elephants now do not care about fire or torchlights or any kind of noise. They charge at us if we turn on our lights towards them. Now people have put up solar fences and elephants will slowly learn how to break them.

Our A/TT respondents thought that elephants recognize these changes and the need to coadapt to people. Both humans and elephants seemed to have thus adapted to one another through processes of mutual physical avoidance, both spatially and temporally. Our opportunistic observations of elephant behavior and people's testimonies suggested that although the daytime belonged to humans, the night was owned by the elephants. During the daytime, people moved to various places for their livelihoods, and the elephants restricted themselves to the tea estates. In the night, although people remained in or near their houses to be safe, elephants moved out of tea estates to travel through riverine areas and villages. People's testimonies and our observations also suggested that elephants followed specific paths and points, which were devoid of high human density, to navigate the landscape, whereas people usually avoided those areas, even during the daytime. Audition and olfaction now formed active semiotic components of the sensory landscape, especially when people and elephants were unable to keep track of one another visually. The elephants were commonly alert, with ears widely erect and occasionally gently flapping, sensing the air with trunks raised as they scanned their surroundings, whereas the people remained still, silently trying to listen to and feel the presence of the elephants. Both species appeared attuned to each other's visual, auditory, and olfactory geographies as they strived to lessen mutually costly, physical conflict.

The A/TT members often imposed voluntary restrictions on their own movement, especially at night, built specific kinds of

houses in the villages, and chose certain livelihoods, such as earning daily wages from nonfarm work over intensive farming, all aimed to lessen encounters with elephants. The people typically continued to be highly tolerant of the elephants unless they visited the labor colonies or the villages. The elephants in the tea estates remained alert and wary of humans as well, resorting to lunging at or chasing them, but only when sufficiently provoked. The familial trope of coexistence, in terms of living together, was thus infused with mutual tolerance and respect but also with physical and temporal avoidance and general feelings of uneasiness. A mutually embodied rhythm of movements and behavioral activity patterns, therefore, had to be built and maintained with due diligence. Its failure often resulted in death or serious injury on both sides.

## Narratives of the future

Reflecting on the future, in the dual context of both A/TT lives and the shared lifeworlds of human and elephant communities, Geeta opined,

I think all will be well. Both elephants and we have a good future. I am working so hard, looking after my family, I am trying to progress in life. The elephant mother also loves her children very much. She is also working hard for them.

As a measure of progress and to earn a good life, most of the plantation A/TT respondents considered buying land elsewhere in a village, adopting farming, and leading an overall calm life. Budhan described such a life succinctly,

There will be rice in the house, vegetables in the farm, areca nuts in the kitchen garden, my children will never be hungry again. If I keep on working in the plantation, there is no chance of this coming true. I have to go out of this tea garden.

He wished similarly for the elephants, who, he thought, should be able to live a decent life in a bountiful forest away from the villages, free from the everyday struggle for mere survival.

In general, however, most A/TT members felt that a search for a peaceful life was a difficult quest because their low wages and mobility were likely to forever bind them to the plantation. It could only become reality with sustained support from various government schemes and political representation. These arguments often spilled over to the elephants. Some of the A/TT members claimed that the elephants were now tied down to the plantations as well, and without support from the government in the form of regenerating forests, they would also have no other option than to live in the plantations and agricultural fields. Prabin Gowala, a 45-year-old man, thus said,

Such a large forest is now gone, has anybody done anything about it? Everyone is sleeping. What will the elephants do? They are also waiting for the forests to return but nobody is listening to their



voices either. Some government representatives and NGOs working here only provide torchlights or erect solar fencing. But nobody has forest regeneration on their agenda.

Several A/TT members also expressed their quiet skepticism about whether elephant-proof solar fences would ever address the actual problem at hand and asked, “So many solar fences have been put up, where will the elephants go? What will they eat?” We consider this to be exemplary of the empathy and goodwill that the A/TT communities almost regularly expressed for the elephants despite the fact that most of them had almost invariably endured elephant-related damage at home and on their lands. They realized that until the structural root causes of their everyday problems were addressed, they and the elephants would continue to be forced to be part of the need economy, scraping out survival under the most difficult of conditions.

## DISCUSSION

Our A/TT narratives revealed unique ways of coconstructing human lives with elephants, influenced by the historical and political transformations surrounding tea plantations, creating a unique natural–cultural ecozone. We characterized this ecozone by analyzing the A/TT narratives of living with elephants based on 3 factors: the amorphous nature of elephants, the uneasy neighborliness between the 2 communities, and perspectives of a shared future.

### The amorphous elephant

From a Western natural science perspective, elephants represent a zoological species, phylogenetically distant from humans, with individuals displaying behaviors that develop and manifest through gene–environment interactions. For the A/TT, elephants are amorphous beings, an intimate part of their shared spiritual, material, emotive, and affective worlds. This echoes other studies on human–elephant relations across the Indian subcontinent, where people, who have shared lives with elephants, had multirelational conceptualizations of them (Locke [2013] in Nepal; Barua [2014a] in Assam; Münster [2016] in Kerala; Kshetry et al. [2021] in northern West Bengal; Jolly et al. [2022] in Tamil Nadu). There is, however, one key difference. Unlike the human communities in our study who were considered Indigenous, the status of the A/TT community as Indigenous has been contested due to their migration into Assam over the last 200 years. Even so, for the A/TT people, elephants are not only representative of the elephant-headed god Ganesha but also benefactors and guardians in their own right, beings that predated humans on Earth and, above all, the actual heirs of their now-shared landscape. The spirituality associated with elephants has nevertheless often been questioned, but not necessarily negated, when elephants caused severe damage to human lives or property. Similar to the obser-

vations made by Barua (2013) and Thekaekara et al. (2021), the A/TT imposed goodness and evil on elephants, leaving them in a dilemma between life giving and death. Elephants were thus guardians of shared landscape, but a competitive being for resources and food. These multiple relations and an oscillation between the spiritual and material world were evident in the A/TT concept of a shared marginalization. They viewed the elephant as a form of life experiencing the hardships of lost places, tied down in bondage to a restrictive world from which escape is sought, rather akin to the plight of the A/TT individuals themselves. And, in this shared marginalization, the life-history strategies of both A/TT and elephant communities were fraught with overcoming poverty.

These manifestations of the elephant and the unique relations of each with the A/TT were never discretely imposed; all the multiple forms overlapped spatially and temporally in a continuum. The elephant thus became with humans a coliving being, capable of sensing, learning, affecting, and being affected by others. From people’s descriptions of knowing elephants, the affective, and often emotive, encounters between elephants and humans did not, however, necessarily remain restricted to their bodies but extended themselves into the surrounding environment. Such encounters manifested themselves through the elephants’ nebulous, yet tangible, presence in the wind, vegetation, or static footprints, where the body of the elephant was no longer omnipresent.

The A/TT community considered elephants fully capable of exerting their agency on other-than-elephant lives. The often-extensive losses people faced, however, suspended the sense of agency ascribed to the elephants, and they were rendered, when thought appropriate, an animated property of the government, thereby shifting the elephants into a category of objects that needed urgent regulation. The dichotomy of whether elephants were governable or not, in fact, often came to the fore when people tried to rationalize why the elephants had left the comfort of their forests and started residing in tea plantations. Through the concept of shared marginalization, nevertheless, the A/TT members further bound themselves with the elephants through their actualized and perceived historical experiences, wherein more powerful actors dispossessed them of their bodies and pushed them into specific ways of living, simply for their survival.

### Uneasy neighbor relations

A truly noteworthy aspect of our understanding of A/TT–elephant interactions and relationships is that 2 of the most important concepts in present-day conservation scholarship—*xongbat* or conflict in Assamese and *xobabosthan* or coexistence—did not feature at all in the A/TT lexicon of being with elephants. Members of the A/TT communities linked their lives with those of the elephants through historical, present, and future contingencies, making it difficult to partition their emergent relations into neat compartments of conflict or coexistence. The tea plantations were considered necessary for the survival of both protagonists, but this did not mean that a



complete overlap of space was appreciated by either species. Members of both communities were welcome to move, rest, or feed in close conjunction with one another but only at certain conceptual and actualized physical and mental distances, which allowed us to simultaneously visualize elements of conflict and coexistence, as traditionally defined, embedded in the entangled human–elephant lifeworlds of Udalguri.

Though Glikman et al. (2021) suggest that there is no consensus on how to define conflict or coexistence, these have usually been described in wildlife conservation studies in measurable, quantitative terms, such as the number of deaths or injuries inflicted or the proportion of habitats shared or mutually excluded by 2 or more species. The A/TT narratives, however, describe living with elephants in terms of their respective quality of life as it unfolds through history and everyday practices of movement, encounter, and survival, thereby transforming a singular notion of relation to relations. The A/TT views of elephants have also never been limited to the fixed attributes of the elephant, but they move beyond and expand to stories of the here and now—stories that run parallel to and occasionally counter the narratives of their own lives. The elephants are defined by not what they are but who they are and more importantly by what they do. The amorphous, subjective, individualized, and empathetically articulated elephant thus dwells within a continuous spectrum of relationality, a neighborliness, though it is fraught with a certain uneasiness.

Although the neighborliness appears to derive from and is characterized by a shared sense of marginalization and yet a hopeful future, the uneasiness appeared to emerge from the omnipresent potential for loss during close-range encounters with elephants and their after effects. For both the A/TT members and the elephants, therefore, an individual could die, a child or calf could become orphaned, a home or habitat could be destroyed, a body could remain hungry, and mental trauma could set in. This uneasiness also stemmed from waiting for such encounters to occur. In the paddy season, the small and marginal A/TT farmers guarded their crops, awake all night, waiting for the stealthy elephants to silently come in and forage on their valuable produce. The elephants, in contrast, hungry over the daytime, waited restlessly for the farmers to go home so that they could then come into the fields. On most of the nights, perhaps nothing would happen. On other nights, either the elephants or the A/TT members would win. The A/TT and elephant bodies were both exhausted, and yet, they were compelled to take up this labor of waiting to survive. Thus, going beyond living against—or what would be simplistically defined as conflict—and living together with—or coexistence—a complex pulsating relationship of uneasy neighborliness becomes the A/TT marker of living close to elephants. Their dwelling becomes enmeshed with respectfulness and reciprocity, always marked by caution.

## A/TT lifeworlds and conservation futures

Despite the need for global or national political economic structures to regulate human–other-than-human relations, we

would draw urgent attention to the A/TT narratives that offer diverse perspectives on the political ecology of living close to wildlife. The A/TT communities' vernacular ethologies and political ecologies acknowledge the shared marginalization of people and elephants, thereby characterizing the problem to allow for potential transformations in landscapes and lives. They also resist the generalization of the *anthropos* in perpetrating and perpetuating the violence inherently attributed to such transformations. The A/TT members asserted that the powerful elite, including colonial powers and contemporary ethnic groups, consistently controlled their resources, work, and therefore lives. The A/TT views of living close to elephants can inform community-centric and rights-based wildlife conservation models, highlighting the importance of situated lives of both people and elephants and politicizing human–nonhuman relations that are enmeshed in past and present modes of dispossession. The elephant is then not merely an object with which to understand humanity but also an active, unmuted subject that exerts agency and creates change. Thus, the people here considered elephants fellow observers of the world and laborers in the more-than-human workforce that they belong to as well (Barua, 2018; Lainé, 2016; Münster, 2016). The A/TT, however, are not without hope for a better future, not only for themselves but also for their fellow elephants. They emphasized the importance of multispecies justice for a peaceful future, where both people and elephants would not only survive together but also thrive. This hope emerges starkly as a counter to capital accumulation and becomes a potential site of resistance to be negotiated with powerful actors. From such a perspective, the conservation ethic cannot narrow itself to the simple preservation of species—both human and other-than-human—but has to engage politically to work toward a far more convivial future for all communities, including the A/TT and their elephants.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We express our sincere gratitude to all the local community members of the study villages and tea estates and the Asian elephant herds and individuals who patiently allowed us to examine their lifeworlds. We acknowledge extensive support provided by the Dhansiri Forest Division Office, Government of Assam; the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru; and the Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal. Fieldwork was supported by grants awarded to S.B. by the Rufford Foundation, the Inlaks Foundation, and the Idea Wild Foundation. Comments from M. Mehta led to an extensive reevaluation of the manuscript. We also thank M. Barua and V. V. Binoy for their comments on an earlier version of this manuscript. Finally, we are grateful to 3 anonymous reviewers who were instrumental in greatly improving this manuscript from its original inception. The term *uneasy neighbors* is used by Sharma et al. (2022), and our use of the term *uneasy neighborly relations* to describe A/TT–elephant relationships is entirely coincidental, but we are grateful that similar thinking pervades current scholarship on the complexities of human–wildlife relationships.

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**How to cite this article:** Banerjee, S., Nayak, D., & Sinha, A. (2024). Adivasi (Tea Tribe) worldviews of living close to wild Asian elephants in Assam, India. *Conservation Biology*, *38*, e14397. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.14397>