

A paradigm shift in the elephant depredation in South Bengal

Introduction:

Visiting of Elephant herd in the crop field during early 1990s was considered to be a great blessing to the local villagers of Midnapur, Bankura and Purulia Districts and it was believed that the crop yield at the elephant sited areas would be much higher than the unvisited field and thus villagers at the above said districts was eager to site elephants at their crop field and never placed their demand for elephant damages made for those period. During those days the concept of Elephant driving, preparation of Hullah and Equipping Hullah parties never known to these villagers and lived happily at least for some period with the Mega Fauna and also happy with the development. During that time, it was seen that an increase in the Forest green cover, many barren refractive Morrhum soil was turning into green with Akashmani (*Accacia auriculiformis*) and *Eucalytus spp* and much and sudden change in the floral diversity which was a significant achievement at one side and large number of villagers were enrolled in the government approved committee membership (Joint Forest Management Committees(JFMCs)) to protect the growing local forest in the other side. All those welcome changes were manmade and it was created by some of the committed foresters and active participation and involvement of local villagers (All those positive developments have invited the mega fauna like elephants at this region and their management become high task today). When the felt need on local Forest was started realized by the local people and then they slowly become complacent with local Forest and its fauna.

Changes in the Elephant herd and its movement:

This is not Dolma elephant now:

During the early period when those less number of elephants came from Dolma hills of Jharkhand and visited these southern district for very short period might be named as Dolma elephant but now those elephants with much more number is staying throughout the year in south west Bengal and thus it should be called as '***south Bengal Elephants***'. Presently (current year) only about 25-30 adult elephants out of 90 and add elephants have returned to Dolma hills of Jharkhand for the last one month (May, 2010) and it may come back at any time (only less than one third of the total elephants are staying for two to three month period at Dolma hill now and the remaining are in South West Bengal).



Elephant herd moving towards non-forest Agricultural crop areas for crop ride by 5.30pm near Barjora Forest.

Rise in the Elephant population:

During early 1990s the Elephant herd was about 20 numbers only, but later its population has increased very much and those growths was very drastic and beyond the carrying capacity of the territory in which it uses the forest where there is no grass lands and larger water bodies. Within a decadal period, its number has boomed more than four times and it really creates great trouble to the field managers (Foresters). Scientifically, any population growth in a habitat beyond its carrying capacity would invite much more trouble to the co-existing species and also to the fringe population. In south west Bengal, human population is considered to be one of the important co-existing species. Here, the problem is mostly to the local villagers where the economic condition is very critical and their livelihood is only agriculture.

Change in the food habits:

As we discussed early, we have no grass land and major food/fodder sources to meet the energy demand of fast growing mega fauna and thus through its ability to find out its own calorific demand, elephant herd have extended its habitat from inside forest into outside forest and changed its food habits from agricultural crop (Paddy and wheat) in to juicy and palatable Horticultural crops (vegetable and fruit crops) like Cucurbits, cabbage and cauliflower, Potato, Brinjal, Colacacia (Ketsu), Tender Jack fruit etc. those are **commercial cash crop** which are

very vital to the local villagers economy. Ultimately, local forest become a part time habitat to the elephant herd during day time and continues the same throughout the seasons. Elephants are going and staying at the Forest Fringe areas longer period in a day than staying inside forest and thus create all type of trouble to the local poor villagers. It is no way justified that when a man has rented his physical labour throughout the day and while taking his compulsory rest at the night is disturbed /tortured by the locally roaming and devastating wild elephants and this is also a continuous phenomenon.



Elephant herd was returning at Malbona village after crop ride from Damodar river side by 5.23am on 23.3.2010

Change in the Elephant Corridor/Route:

Once the Elephant herd was use to come to Paschim Midnapur District from Dolma hills of Jharkhand and goes back to Dolma and later start penetrating further in to Bankura District and now it started going to Burdwan district as well. As we all know that an Elephant Reserve (*Mayurjharna*) has been declared in South west Bengal but now hardly any elephants are staying/using its declared reserve for any of its purpose or in any season. Now, all 90 and add Elephants are moving on its own way and changes its route drastically both annually and even seasonally. Now the said herd at Bankura District is trying to cross

River Damodar at Durgapur and search for their need at Durgapur township and also crosses the same river at Sonamukhi-Patrasayer side and goes towards NH-2 Road and Delhi-Kolkata rail line and crosses the same and goes further North-east and goes and goes and goes. Who knows it may create one day an international Corridor between India-Bangladesh.

Bankura-Midnapur Group:

The Broader and common Elephant Entry Route in South Bengal was:

Dolma hills- ⇨ Shilda ⇨ Lalgah ⇨ Katabari ⇨ Hoomgarh ⇨ Roskunda
 ⇨ Mandalpushkarani ⇨ Kolabagan ⇨ Bankadaha (Ashthasole) ⇨ Kanabari
 ⇨ Basudevpur ⇨ Pokasghot ⇨ Sonamukhi ⇨ Beliatore ⇨ Barjora.

The Broader and common Elephant Exit Route in South Bengal was:

Barjora ⇨ Brindabanpur/Panchal ⇨ Onda ⇨ Katabari ⇨ Harapathi
 Rajpur ⇨ Piardanga ⇨ Dhadhika ⇨ Roskunda ⇨ Hoomgarh
 Katabari ⇨ Lalgah ⇨ Shilda ⇨ Dolma hills

Now, the elephants are moving very differently and also creating new routes and going to the unseen places to find out their food. At Rupnarayan division, earlier it has never visited Koyma and not seen Jogardanga as elephant affected places but for recent time these are some places where it creates much damage and troubles. In Bankura, places like Mejia and even Barjora was not known place for Elephant herd menace but now it keep on going and staying for longer period and making much difficulties to the local villagers and administration.

Purulia Group:

The elephants coming to Purulia district from Jharkhand state are two groups. One is about 12-14 number of elephants coming from Hazaribah district and crosses the river Swernareka and enter Kotzila region of non-forest area of about 10-12 km and enter in to Jhalda Range area in Purulia district and create devastation. The second group is of about 12-14 in number and coming from Ranchi area and crosses the river Swernareka and enters Bagundi Range area and also spread in to part of Jhalda Range jurisdiction and remains intact from other group. Earlier, those elephants use to come in the month of July and

returned by January-February but now they are staying throughout the year and creating havoc to local villagers and administration.



Elephant herd crossing the Forest Road at Joypur Forest areas on 14.4.2010

Changes in the Elephant seasonal movement:

Earlier Dolma Elephants was coming to Midnapur- Bankura districts before *Puja* season (September-October) particularly during the period when the agricultural crops are near to maturity(milky stage) and stays for about three to four months and leave around February end. Now, there is no fixed time, season and place to come and create devastation. All those seasonally moving elephants are started staying permanently and creating nightmare to the local villagers and Forest administration.

Changes in the type of damages due to Elephants herd:

As we all seen earlier that during 1990s and early 2000s the common damages caused by Elephants was crop damage particularly milky stage Paddy crop and very few places house damages was reported. In the recent time, it has increased its volume and types, like killing of more poor villagers, killing of cattle, much devastation to houses and Household storage grains, large scale damage to vegetables crops and fruit crops, sugarcanes, Banana, fruit trees and even newly planted Sal plantation. In addition to that it damages pipelines, small canals, Bore wells, Ring wells, village water bodies and in nutshell; at this region nothing is left beyond the purview of Elephant damage. Why this change in the damage component? because earlier periods these elephants were seasonal rider to the paddy crop field but in the recent time it has started staying almost throughout the year, particularly during off season when there is no crop left in the field but for their own survival, elephants are regularly visiting the villages and lifting

food grains by damaging *kutcha* and *semi-pucca* houses and killing cattle and eating the fodder left at the cattle shed and killing the defending poor villagers. Really, nowadays living at villages where the elephants are visiting regularly is not better than hell. They are losing life, livelihood and peace. The greatest pain is that existence of mental drama where you don't know but the elephants may come any time and does anything against you and this is the reality at many villagers mind in Bankura, Midnapur and Purulia Districts.

Change in the villagers mind set and socio-cultural impact:

Earlier, the local villagers were used to come and put their effort to take away the elephants from the villages and they get some wages or with social service by good coordination of Forest department and JFMCs members. Now, most of the villagers are violent against the elephant visit and creating much challenge to the department. This is not a simple issue but much more in to it. This is due to large scale damage to many families and because of that they have lost their life, livelihood and peace; the issue becomes long lasting and without addressed; elephants are day to day trouble and also permanent to the local villagers. The recent change in the political color has further aggravated the problem. In the recent time, villagers living at the elephant infested areas facing some typical problems i.e. there is no bride or bridegroom is ready to have marriage agreement from those villagers are having elephant problem. This is mainly due to the magnitude of the issue and it's permanent in nature.

Residential Elephants and its natures and changes in the recent time:

We all know that residential elephants living at those three districts of South West Bengal are periodic rejection from the larger herd. Generally it won't have any future but it does complete many human futures within no time at those villages. One of the most dangerous wild life in these region is considered to be the residential elephants. Altogether the present population of Residential Elephants in south west Bengal is about 30 numbers but their effect at the field is much more than the herd elephants. They are the main human killer and also destroyer of houses and house hold food grain and other edibles. Earlier only very few numbers of residential elephant in the form of either Makna or old tusker but now we are seeing even sub-Adult male and female elephants are become residential. In the current year, we have noticed seven numbers of elephants including one calf (about three months old) is staying at Barjora for about six month period. These small groups are not responding to the driving operation, even once it goes but return back to those areas in an un-noticed manner but start creating trouble after few days. Whenever the herd elephants enter in to a territory where the residential elephants are habitating, it starts moves away (repelling each other) from those areas and creates much damage to life and property. During those periods, it remains violent and dangerous to villagers. At many occasions, whenever a residential

elephant kills a human being, within no time it disappears from that spot/region and move away very long distance and behave as such it is not known to that event (accident). Really the villagers are lost their patient due to this elephant and very often our staffs are badly treated by the affected villagers.



One male Residential Elephant with single Tusker was sited at Barjora village area on October, 22, 2009 by 11.45 am.

Role of Administration and its helplessness:

Driving of Elephants:

Driving of elephants is nothing but driving without steering. You have lots of plan, Hullah and Hullah parties and hired labourer but you never know that how much it will be effective and successful. Many time during the driving operation, when you feel that the elephants are moving very well for few hours but all of sudden you will notice thousands of villagers standing in front of the elephant herd with much more strength of hullahs and human force with much more aggressivity and then within few minutes all those elephants either will split in to many more unmanageable micro-group and returned to their original place where from the driving was started. One side we could notice committed staffs and their

team working hard and on the other side we could also found a self interested group which would drive towards undesired places. The main purpose to take towards undesired places is to keep the elephant herd for longer days at their places by doing so, they would get more wages through the driving operation, which is considered to be much remunerative than any other labour work, that is why it is driving without steering. One side we are getting pressure from villagers to take away the troubling elephants and other side you would found the falls driving/miss-driving. When the days are in progress your budget will irk you and getting pressure from various places. Many times you would feel that you are a lone fighter/driver.



Elephant driving progress at Radhanagar Range area in Bankura North Division on 10.4.2010

Difficulties in the implementation of Schemes and Acts:

The above said three southern districts are native to large number of tribal and other backward class population and their socio-economic condition is not stronger. In the recent times, various developmental works are being implemented and it needs much more planning and execution. Due to presence of both residential and seasonally moving herd elephant for larger period, it becomes much more difficult and cumbersome to do the work with much involvement. Elephant menaces in these districts are become regular and the local damage caused by those elephants particularly residential elephants make the life of staff and administration very tough. Due to elephants problems at the field level, villagers are challenging the administration and threatening and openly telling the staff that they will create trouble when the elephants will come to their areas. It becomes very much soft corner to our staff that they are not in a position to implement

the protection/controlling of illegal activities very strongly. It is not new to this region particularly in Bankura district that whenever any undue incidents happened by the elephants, the villagers are immediately targeting our staff and administration, even best of our effort we could not give the best protection to our staff, it is very much unfortunate.

What is the local villager's expectation?

Whenever the elephant goes to the village side they are asking the forest department to 'take your elephant'. Our forest is mosaic like patches in south Bengal and no one knows where to take and how to keep those elephants inside the forest. Almost all the local villagers particularly in Barjora areas they are demanding to eliminate the human killing residential elephants and they want peace. Recently, it has been told from the department that few of the sub-adults from the herd will be captured and taken to north Bengal. The news has reached the local villagers and they also expecting that something will be done by the forest department but due to non-implementation of the same, the local villagers are more disappointed and now convincing them is very difficult during elephant depredation days. The local villagers at the elephant prone areas need permanent solution against the elephant menace, what could do from the divisional administration?

Thinking for the future:

Really there is no future to those 30 numbers of residential elephants which are creating huge damage to life and property to this region. We have to give our deep thought about its management by keeping the fact in the mind that more than few lacs poor villagers are living with the mental drama because of this elephants. Any action like firefighting type will not give any improvement rather it will be wastage to our money and energy. The issue is larger, it needs great attention because many villagers have lost their life and this is not because of the elephant factor alone, there is also considerable amount of lacunae from the administrative part as well. We could have managed the issue still better by taking the matter more seriously. All those 90 and add number of herd elephants and 30 and more number of residential elephants most probably gonging to stay back in south Bengal which is already being noticed. It is the high time to think about its future management by having feeling on the local poor villager, field staff and also for the mega fauna too.. Fodder planting, creation of permanent and large size water hole,

more incentive to villagers, involving them by giving more empowerment, scientific training of staff and villagers, culling of futureless trouble shooting residential elephants and shifting of those excess elephant population from South Bengal to some other place/state may be something we could think. I very sincerely request everyone in the Forest directorate to kindly think some comprehensive plan before the issue become uncontrollable.



A large number of elephants of about 90 number was returning back from crop ride at Damodar riverside (Non-Forest and non-FPC area) and sited at Malbona village near Barjora by 5.23am on 23.3.2010.

Thank you very much for giving your time for reading these pages.

**DR.S.KULANDAIVEL, IFS
DIVISIONAL FOREST OFFICER,
BANKURA NORTH DIVISION.**