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Elephant Catching In The Khasi-Jaintia Hills During The Colonial Era

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The Khasi-Jaintia Hills, now part of the state of Meghalaya, are often referred to as the "Scotland of the East." Located in the northeastern region of India, Meghalaya is bounded to the north by the Goalpara, Kamrup, and Nagaon (formerly Nowgong) districts of Assam; to the east by the Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao (formerly North Cachar Hills) districts of Assam; to the south by the Mymensingh Sadar and Sylhet Sadar districts of Bangladesh; and to the west by the Mymensingh Sadar district of Bangladesh and the Goalpara district of Assam. The state covers a geographical area of 22,429 square kilometres and lies between latitudes 24°58'N and 26°07'N and longitudes 89°48'E and 92°52'E[i]. Meghalaya is predominantly hilly, featuring deep gorges and small valleys, with elevations ranging from 150 meters to 1,950 meters above sea level. According to the 2011 Census of India, the state had a population of 2,966,889. Meghalaya was carved out of Assam and attained full statehood on 21st January 1972.

The state is inhabited by three major ethnic communities: the Khasis (including the Khyrim), the Pnar or Synteng (commonly known as the Jaintias), and the Garos. Other smaller communities, such as the Bhoi, War, and Lyngngam, are of Mon-Khmer Proto-Australoid origin, while the Garos belong to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic stock and primarily reside in the Garo Hills[ii]. Historically, all the ethnic groups inhabiting the Khasi-Jaintia Hills were collectively referred to as the Khasis or Cossyeah.

This paper seeks to explore the historical significance of elephants and their close relationship with human societies in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. It outlines how elephants have historically been utilized to assist human efforts, both in everyday labour and warfare. The advent of colonial rule marked a turning point in the management and utilization of fauna and flora in Northeast India. With increased control over the natural environment, elephants became a central element in both economic and strategic spheres, serving as both domestic animals and instruments of statecraft.

The absence of written records among the Khasi-Jaintia people has rendered their origins obscure. Despite several scholarly attempts to trace their ancestry, definitive conclusions remain elusive. According to oral traditions, the Khasi-Jaintia people are believed to have migrated to the region from the east. Their written script is said to have been lost somewhere between Madur Maskut and Nongkseh, while other traditions suggest it was lost in a flood. Nevertheless, references to the Khasi-Jaintia people appear in the Buranjis (chronicles) of the Ahoms and in Bengali texts composed by the plains people of Sylhet.[iii]

Prior to the advent of colonial rule, elephants played a significant role in Khasi-Jaintia society. The domestication of elephants was widely practiced, not only due to their economic utility but also because of their cultural and symbolic significance. This cultural importance is evident in traditional adornments such as necklaces and rings, which were often decorated with ivory. In many cases, ivory was used in place of precious stones. The Khasi-Jaintia people believed that wearing ornaments embedded with elephant ivory

or teeth could protect individuals from malevolent spirits as well as from the mythical creature known as the Thlen.[iv] However, the relationship between humans and elephants—and more broadly, their control over forest resources—underwent a profound transformation following the annexation of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills by the British colonial administration.

Techniques and Methods of Elephant Catching in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills

The art of elephant capture in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, as well as in the adjoining plains, was based on relatively simple yet effective techniques. These methods were later adopted and refined by the British colonial authorities. The Khasi and Jaintia people are believed to have learned these techniques from their neighbours in the Surma and Brahmaputra valleys.

One of the earliest and most commonly used methods was pit trapping. In this technique, a deep pit was dug along a known elephant trail and camouflaged with leaves and foliage. Bananas were used as bait to lure the elephants. Once an elephant fell into the pit, trained handlers for catching elephants—koonkies and mahouts—would move in to immobilize the animal and later extract it using ropes. However, this method was fraught with risk as it often caused severe injuries to the captured elephant, necessitating cautious implementation.[v]

Another widely used technique involved the employment of domesticated elephants. Experienced mahouts would approach and corner wild elephants with the assistance of trained elephants. Once the wild elephants were surrounded, their legs were tied with ropes to subdue and control them.[vi]

A third method was the use of rope traps and noosing. In this technique, skilled koonkies and mahouts would track and drive a herd of elephants into an open area, confining them within a designated space. This process required exceptional courage and expertise, as it involved direct engagement with aggressive and unpredictable wild elephants. Once the animals were contained, they were captured using strong ropes and iron chains.[vii]

Use of Intoxicants and Early Historical Records of Elephant Catching in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills

In addition to the previously discussed techniques, the Khasi-Jaintia people also employed a unique method rooted in traditional ecological knowledge. According to oral tradition, intoxicating drinks—particularly kiad, a locally brewed rice beer—were occasionally used to lure and subdue elephants. Earthen pots filled with kiad were strategically placed along known elephant trails, near salt-licks, or close to watering holes. Attracted by the sweet, yeasty aroma, elephants would consume the beverage. Upon ingesting large quantities, the elephants would become noticeably intoxicated, rendering them slower and less aggressive.[viii] This state made them easier to capture using ropes, pits, or enclosures.

In some instances, naturally fermented fruits or mash, such as overripe bananas or jackfruit, were also used for a similar effect. However, this method was not widely adopted due to its unpredictability. Intoxicated elephants could become docile, but in other cases, they turned aggressive and highly dangerous. Because of this uncertainty, the use of intoxicants remained a supplementary technique, employed only under special circumstances and with great caution.[ix]

British colonial officers, such as Gait and Allen, documented cases of elephants being drawn to or breaking into village storage facilities in search of rice beer, illustrating the effectiveness of this technique and the elephants' sensitivity to fermented substances. These observations underscore the profound understanding the Khasi and Jaintia people had of their natural environment and their ability to harness this knowledge in traditional elephant-catching practices, demonstrating a balance between control and respect for the animal. [x]

The earliest recorded account of elephants being used by the Khasi-Jaintia people is found in the writings of Robert Lindsay, the District Collector of Sylhet. In a letter dated 14th December 1787, [xi] addressed to the authorities in Calcutta, Lindsay described the Bengal frontier region of Sylhet—particularly the Pandua area located in the southern part of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills—as being under the control of the Khasi-Jaintia Rajas

(chiefs or kings). This region was rich in wildlife, including wild buffaloes, tigers, leopards, elephants, wild boars, and deer.[xii]

During his first meeting with the Jaintia Raja, Lindsay accompanied the ruler on a hunting expedition, during which they pursued wild buffaloes on elephant-back. The presence of large wild animals such as elephants, tigers, and wild hogs in the foothills of the Pandua region is also confirmed in the Gazetteer of Bengal.[xiii] Lindsay further recorded that elephants had been supplied to the British government as early as 1772, during the tenure of William Makepeace Thackeray, for use by the East India Company in Calcutta.

Lindsay also provided detailed observations regarding dangerous types of elephants. According to him, three types of elephants were considered especially perilous:

1. Elephants born with a left tusk,
2. Elephants bearing a black spot below the mouth—believed not only to be dangerous but also to bring misfortune,
3. Solitary elephants expelled from their herd—considered the most dangerous of all, as these outcasts typically roamed alone and were highly unpredictable.[xiv]

These accounts offer valuable insights into the indigenous methods of elephant management and the nuanced understanding of elephant behaviour among the Khasi-Jaintia people during the pre-colonial and early colonial period.

Colonial Observations and the Strategic Role of Elephants in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills

British officials, such as the renowned botanist Joseph Dalton Hooker, recorded valuable observations about the wildlife in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. During his travels through the region in July 1850, Hooker noted the presence of various rare wild animals, including tigers, wild dogs, bears, and wild elephants. He observed that the elephants in the hills were similar in size to those found in the plains of Assam but were considered more aggressive and dangerous. Due to the absence of a written script among the Khasi-Jaintia people, it is difficult to comprehensively reconstruct the history of elephant-catching practices in the pre-colonial period. Nevertheless, the region has long been known for its rich biodiversity, including the majestic Asian elephant (Elephas maximus). The documented presence of elephants in areas such as the Pandua region indicates that the Khasi-Jaintia people likely possessed indigenous knowledge of capturing and domesticating wild elephants.[xv]

Furthermore, the southern region of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills was economically significant due to its lucrative limestone deposits. Recognizing the economic potential of the region, British colonial authorities found it necessary to capture and domesticate elephants for use in transportation and logistical operations. Elephants played a crucial role in the movement of materials across difficult terrain, reinforcing their strategic importance in both indigenous and colonial economies.

Forest Rules and Regulations Enacted by the British Government in Colonial Assam

The Khasi-Jaintia Hills came under the control of the British government in the 1830s. Consequently, it became necessary for the colonial administration to implement rules and regulations to manage the use and hunting of elephants, both in the hills and in the plains of Assam. John M'Cosh reported that approximately 700 to 1,000 elephants were exported from the forests of Assam to the Surma Valley and Bengal. In response to such extensive exploitation, the colonial authorities began to assert legal control over vast tracts of forest land, primarily to monopolize access to the valuable natural resources these forests contained. On 18 November 1874, H. Luttman Johnson, Esq., Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, submitted a proposal to the Government outlining the methods and procedures for capturing elephants. [xvi] The techniques used in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills were similar to those employed in the plains of Assam, Sylhet, and other hill regions of the province. During the colonial period, elephants became a significant source of revenue in the plains of Assam, a trend that extended to the Khasi-Jaintia Hills as well.[xvii]

It is important to note that the British administration recognized that many tribal communities in Assam regarded forests as sacred spaces and dwelling places of deities. Despite this, the British government passed the **Forest Act of 1861** to facilitate the preservation of forests and their produce. This legislation laid the foundation for a formal forest policy in the region. It affirmed British sovereignty over forested areas and authorized the colonial state to regulate the extraction and trade of forest resources, particularly timber.[xviii] Thus, the 1861 Act marked the beginning of legal forest governance in both the plains and hills of Assam.

By the end of the 19th century, growing demands for land to expand tea plantations, construct civil infrastructure, and facilitate elephant catching led the British to replace the 1861 legislation with the **Indian Forest Act of 1878**. This act categorized forests into three types:

1. **Reserved Forests** – Placed entirely under government control, prohibiting local usage.
2. **Protected Forests** – These were primarily designated as sources of drinking water and subject to limited restrictions.
3. **Village Forests** – Allocated for local community use but with regulated access.[xix]

This classification system redefined forest boundaries and excluded tribal communities from accessing resources they had traditionally relied upon. As a result, tensions grew between the colonial administration and indigenous groups.

To address the specific context of tribal populations inhabiting Assam's forested hills, the government enacted the **Assam Forest Regulation of 1891**. This regulation granted district officers broader authority to manage forests locally and, importantly, allowed certain areas to be designated as non-forest land, thereby reducing conflict with forest-dwelling tribal communities. Later, the government passed the **Indian Forest Act of 1927**, which consolidated previous forest laws and reinforced the legal authority of the state over forests across India, including the tribal-inhabited hill regions of Assam. This act remains one of the most significant legal instruments in the history of forest governance in India, codifying the centralized control of forest resources and further limiting traditional tribal access.[xx]

Rules and Regulations for Elephant Catching in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills

The British administration observed that the traditional methods of capturing elephants in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills were often harmful and, from their perspective, barbaric. Given that elephants were also venerated and held sacred in various traditions, the British deemed it necessary to enact formal rules and regulations governing the methods and processes of elephant capture. Accordingly, during 1874–75, the Chief Commissioner of Assam passed an Act for the preservation and regulated catching of elephants in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, which was subsequently accepted by the Government of British India. The rules and regulations under this Act were as follows:

(a) The forests inhabited by elephants were to be officially designated as mehal (areas reserved for elephants).
(b) These mehals would be leased through public auctions to the highest bidder.
(c) The Khasi and Jaintia chiefs, under whose jurisdiction the mehal was located, were entitled to receive half of the profits generated by the lease.
(d) The government would relinquish all claims to royalty on the revenue thus earned.
(e) In cases where the chiefs themselves wished to catch elephants within their own mehal, the area would be reserved for them, provided they paid half of the revenue to the government.
(f) These rules applied specifically to the Khasi Hills. As the Jaintia Hills were directly under British administration, individuals in this region were required to obtain a license for elephant capture by submitting the appropriate forms.[xxi]

As elephants became a valuable commodity, essential for use in the military and police services, the British government found it necessary to introduce further legislation to regulate and preserve elephant populations. Over time, they adopted traditional elephant-hunting techniques, the most notable being the Khedda system. This system was recommended by G. P. Sanderson for use in Mysore in 1873 and was later adopted across British India. The Khedda system represented a significant development in colonial elephant management policy. Supported by British officials such as E. A. Gait and Shadwell, the British Government

in Assam passed a landmark piece of legislation known as The Elephants' Preservation Act, 1879 (Act No. VI of 1879).[xxii] The primary objective of this Act was to regulate and restrict the indiscriminate killing of wild elephants. It was introduced in response to growing concerns about declining elephant populations and the increasing recognition of their economic and ecological significance.

A Detailed Overview of the Elephant Preservation Act (Act VI of 1879)

The Elephant Preservation Act (Act VI of 1879) was a landmark piece of colonial legislation introduced by the British Government in Assam to regulate and conserve elephant populations. The primary objectives of the Act were as follows:

(a) To **increase the population of elephants**, particularly wild elephants. Given that Assam was predominantly forested and the timber industry was expanding rapidly, elephants were essential for logging and transportation services.

(b) To **curb indiscriminate hunting and killing** of elephants, which had led to a noticeable decline in their numbers.

(c) To **impose penalties** for the illegal killing of elephants and the unauthorized trade in elephant products, such as ivory.

(d) To **authorize forest officials** and empower local governments with the ability to decide which elephants could be hunted and which were to be protected.

The Act was applicable throughout the province of Assam and could be extended to other areas by the Governor-General in Council or the respective provincial governments. This allowed for localized implementation, enabling provincial authorities to notify specific regions where the Act would be enforced.

(e) The Act made it **illegal to kill, capture, or injure wild elephants** without obtaining a proper license or official permission from the government. A formal licensing system was introduced, requiring individuals or hunting parties to acquire authorization before engaging in elephant hunting or capture.

(f) Additionally, **owners of domesticated elephants** were required to obtain licenses, as these animals could potentially cause harm to life and property.

(g) The Act empowered local governments to **designate specific forests as protected areas**, primarily with the objective of preserving water resources in the hilly regions of Assam. Forest officials were also granted authority to **confiscate arms and weapons** from hunters who violated the provisions of the Act. Violators were subject to legal penalties, including fines and imprisonment.

(h) Under the Act, **mahals** (designated elephant capture zones) were established across the plains and hills of Assam.

(i) Elephant capture activities were restricted to within these **mahals**. Any capture conducted outside these areas was considered illegal and punishable under the provisions of the Act.

(j) The Act mandated that elephants intended for domestication should be captured using the **Khedda system**, a technique that involved driving herds into enclosures. However, exceptions were made to allow the **shooting of rogue or dangerous elephants** that posed a threat to human life or settlements.[xxiii]

Significance of the Elephant Preservation Act (Act VI of 1879)

The enactment of the Elephant Preservation Act VI of 1879 had a profound impact on the traditional elephant-catching practices of the Khasi-Jaintia people. As a result of this legislation, they could no longer employ their indigenous techniques for capturing elephants. Over time, these traditional methods were lost, and even the oral narratives that once preserved this knowledge disappeared entirely. While the Act was designed as a protective measure aimed at ensuring ecological balance between humans and the

environment, its implementation in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills disrupted the longstanding relationship between the tribal communities and their natural surroundings.

The enforcement of the Act contributed to the erosion of traditional ecological knowledge and led to a deeper cultural dislocation, weakening the indigenous peoples' connection with the forest and its preservation. Moreover, elephant catching in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills gained strategic importance with the expansion of road networks that linked the southern foothills of Pandua to the plains of Sylhet. The rise of the timber trade, the establishment of sawmills, and the growth of carpentry activities in the region further reinforced the commodification of elephants.

Areas Where Elephants Were Extant in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills

According to accounts provided by British officials, elephants were primarily found in the southern regions of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. In addition to this area, elephants also inhabited regions such as Rambrai and the northern areas of the hills, particularly the Bhoi region, which borders Kamrup and Goalpara in the plains of Assam.

Following the enactment of the Elephant Preservation Act VI of 1879, mahals (designated elephant capture zones) were established for regulated elephant catching in both the hills and plains of Assam. In 1891, the British administration created nine such mahals. Among these, the Dwara Mahal and the Khasia Marai Valley Mahal fell within the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. These mahals were put up for auction for the fiscal years 1891–1892 and 1892–1893, starting from 21st September 1891, due to the high concentration of elephants in these areas. In a letter dated 18th September 1891 (No. 366/R), Oswin Wyenton informed the Deputy Commissioner of Shillong of the urgent need to grant permission for the use of the Khedda system to capture elephants before they migrated to the plains of Sylhet. According to Section 7 of the Elephant Preservation Act VI of 1879, elephant capturing was to be conducted strictly within the designated mahal areas. Any capturing done outside these boundaries was deemed illegal and punishable under the provisions of the Act.[xxiv]

Another prominent area for elephant catching was the northern region of the Khasi Hills, specifically Rambrai. In 1891, the Syiem (chief) of Rambrai requested permission from the Deputy Commissioner of Shillong to capture elephants within his jurisdiction, which lay outside the officially designated mahals. The government granted him a two-year permit, on the condition that he pay a royalty of Rs. 100 for every elephant captured.[xxv]

Decline in Elephant Catching in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills

The practice of elephant catching in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills began to decline from the 1910s onward. According to a report by Mr. Errol Gray, the number of elephant herds in the region had decreased to approximately 250. The British government also reduced the number of mahals (designated elephant capture zones), and by June 1913, only two mahals remained in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. One was located near the plains of Assam bordering Nowgong district, while the other was situated near the plains of Sylhet. As a result, the British authorities faced increasing difficulty in maintaining the required number of elephants for use in Assam and for supply to Bengal. To address this shortfall, Mr. Gray recommended expanding elephant-catching operations to the Garo Hills. Consequently, in July 1913, around nine new mahals were established in the Garo Hills to meet the growing demand for elephants.[xxvi]

Conclusion

Although the use of elephants in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya did not achieve the same scale or importance as in the plains of Assam, elephants nonetheless played a significant role in the cultural and economic life of the Khasi-Jaintia people. These majestic animals were not only an integral part of the region's ecological landscape but were also deeply embedded in the socio-economic practices of the communities. While elephant hunting for ivory was rare in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, elephants were primarily captured for various utilitarian purposes. The Jaintia Raja, for instance, maintained elephants that were used for hunting, symbolizing both status and royal authority. A notable historical remnant is the bathing pool of the Jaintia Raja located at Syndai. Interestingly, water was supplied to this pool through a stone channel

carved in the shape of an elephant, with the water entering the pool through the elephant's trunk—demonstrating the cultural reverence accorded to elephants. Thus, elephants have a long and culturally significant history in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. Once symbols of power and prestige—particularly for the Jaintia Raja—these animals were gradually commodified with the advent of colonial rule in the region.

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