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Human-Elephant Conflict: An Analysis of Majuli District, Assam

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Abstract:

We are now living in a modern globalized world, in the name of development we are actually destroying all the natural resources. Environmental degradation resulted into many new situations such as human wildlife conflict. Such kind of conflict brings threat to the ecology itself, the balance between different elements of environment has to be maintained. Otherwise, it is not good for human being and also for other species. Assam is home to many endangered and less endangered animals. Rhino, Elephant, Tiger, Monkey etc. are some important animals of which Assam is famous for. But, due to negligence of human being these animals are gradually losing their habitats. And ultimately it resulted into human-wildlife conflict. Among such conflicts, human-elephant conflict is the most prominent one. Through this study, the researcher try to find out the actual picture behind human-elephant conflict and its various dimensions.

Keywords: Environment, Human-Elephant Conflict, Deforestation, Elephant Corridor, Habitat, Majuli, Assam

Introduction:

Environment-the natural world where people, animal and plants live; it is vast world that include almost all the things that are necessary for a living body and also for a non-living being. To maintain a healthy environment, we must keep the balance between every element of the nature. If the balance become unstable, then it will lead to the creation of environmental degradation or destruction of nature, which is not actually good for human and other species.

Human being and animal, both are two important element of environment; one cannot live without the other. But, in today's world, the relation between human and animal is getting worse. It is seen that Human-Animal conflict is becoming a critical threat to the survival of many globally and locally endangered species as well as human being. These type of conflict become a threat to some rare species like-Sumatran Tiger, the Asian Lion,

Snow Leopard, Red Colobus Monkey, Bear and also to some less endangered species like- Monkey, Elephant, Rhino, Buffalo, Tiger etc. Human-animal conflict also undermine human welfare, health and safety; also have economic and social costs. It has far-reaching environmental impacts.

India's North-East, particularly the state of Assam, is viewed as one of the largest home to the Asian Elephants. People of Assam has a tradition of keeping elephants at home as domestic animal. The legacy of keeping elephants in captivity by inhabitants of this region goes back several centuries. From the mythological period to the modern time, it is almost the same. Mahabharata, the epic gives the proof of using elephants by the King Bhagadatta in the war of kurukshetra. The Ahom kings and the British colonial power also used elephants in many ways. But, due to exploitation of forests in the modern world, the relation between human beings and elephants are started to getting worse gradually.

Human-Elephant Conflict-Causes and Impacts:

Conflict between humans and wildlife is an age old one; however, due to rapid growth of human population and subsequent reduction of natural habitat it become severe. Every single living being compete with each other for a better life.

The Asian elephant is the largest terrestrial mammal of the present era in Assam and India. It is inextricably linked with our history. The elephant requires a large home range and is usually one of the first species to suffer the consequences of habitat loss, fragmentation and destruction. Because of all these consequences, the interaction between human and elephant is increasing and it is leading to conflicts. However, the conflict with wild elephants has become the most serious concern in Assam. The elephants are the only animal that can destroy dwelling houses thus putting it face to face with humans on a regular basis in Assam. The topic "Human-Elephant Conflict", itself is a vast area of study which includes numerous dimensions and issues in it. Prominent causes that leads to human-elephant conflict are:

- **Habitat Loss:** The prime cause of human-elephant conflict is habitat loss. Elephants are increasingly being thrown away from their habitats. Humans are encroaching these lands for farming and infrastructural development, which leaves elephants with small patches of disconnected land. Their habitat has also suffered from de-forestation. Various case study has taken place to look into the issue; it shows that in Sonitpur district of Assam, which is a part of Sonitpur Elephant Reserve, an organized encroachment has resulted in severe habitat destruction within a very short period.
- **Habitat Fragmentation:** It is also another important cause of human-elephant conflict. Habitat fragmentation divides elephant populations into small, isolated groups, which are then at risk of inbreeding. Because of the fragmentation, various threat emerged against elephants. The prime threat to elephant is the poaching for ivory. This is done by some vicious cycle only for their own interest of earning money.

- **Deforestation:** The reason behind deforestation is the movement of human being to the forest area. People illegally entered into the forest area and in the name of collecting resources, they destroy the forest area. Deforestation is one of the leading cause of human-elephant conflict. With more and more of their habitat getting taken away from them by human, the elephants have no choice but to fight with human.
- **Movements of Elephants from Forest to Human Dominated Landscapes:** This is also an important cause of human-elephant conflict. But this only happens due to human occupation over forest areas and also they loss their habitats. Elephants have no other choice left, but to enter 'human settlement' in search of food and fodder.
- **Destruction of Elephant Corridors:** Elephant corridors are narrow stripes of land that connect two large habitats. But, the elephant corridors are getting fragmented and destructed because of all-round development like human settlements, roads, railway line, electric lines, canal, mining and may more. And this also become a serious reason behind human-elephant conflict.

The above mentioned causes are most prominent in human-elephant conflict. Human-elephant conflict severely impacts the ecosystem as a whole and biodiversity as well. Mostly, it become a threat to human and elephant itself. In recent times, destruction of houses, raid on agriculture and human death become a general thing in human-elephant conflict. In Assam, every year at least 30-40 persons are losing their lives while a dozen or so elephants are killed in retaliation. Human death increased due to these type of conflict. There are also various other dimensions that is related to the issue of human-elephant conflict. Issue of wildlife conservation and wise use of nature are two important dimensions related to the conflict. It undermine human welfare, health and safety. Issue of human security, protection of human rights and many more become the prime issue. Role of government is quiet crucial in human-elephant conflict, issue of animal market, various social and economic costs are related to human-elephant conflict. Thus, the issue of human-elephant conflict are now becoming the most frequent, serious and widespread issue that threaten the life of both human and elephant.

Objectives of the Study:

This research endeavor has following objectives:

1. To find out the reasons behind human-elephant conflict according to the local people
2. To find out the government strategies to reduce such problem
3. How much the local people are aware or concerned about the problem
4. To elucidate the experience of victims of such conflict

Methodology:

In a scientific research, researcher need to follow some tools and techniques to collect data and information. This research is also done on the basis of some scientific tool. The study area has been chosen on the basis of number of victims of such conflict. Both primary and secondary data are used in the process of research. For the field work, the researcher visited house to house.

The review of the literature was based on various books, articles, journals and reports. For collection of data, several case studies, government reports and group discussions were used.

The samples for the study includes both men and women irrespective of their caste, class, religion and literacy. The total number of respondent was 27.

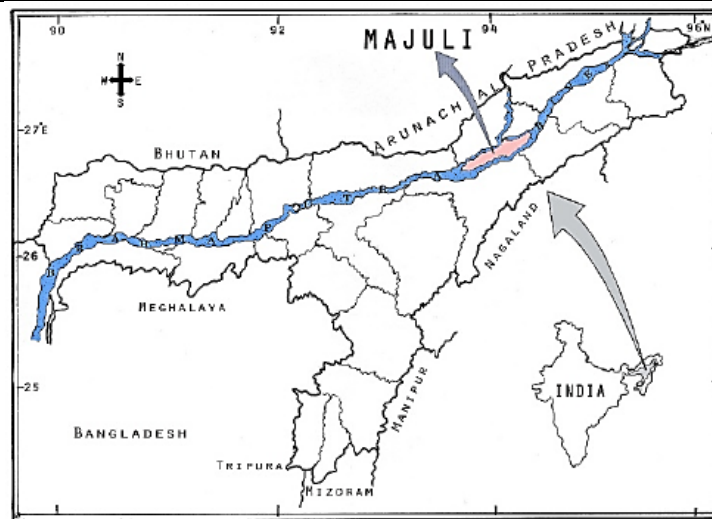
Area of Study:

World's largest river island, Majuli is an island district of North-Eastern state Assam, India. It is a wetland and a bio diversity hotspot, many rare and endangered species are present here including some migratory birds. This island is almost pollution free and eco friendly. Prior to 2016, Majuli was a circle under Jorhat district; in 2016, September 8th Majuli was declared as district. The total population of Majuli, according to 2011 census is 1,67,304; out of which 85,566 are males and 81738 are females. Majuli has a sex ratio of 955 females per 1000 males and scheduled castes and scheduled tribes make up 14.27% and 46.38% of the population.

It is not an original habitat of many wild animals like Elephant. But, due to its ecological richness, various wild animals pay a visit to the place. According to Rathin Barman, Joint Director of Wildlife Trust of India, Elephants are coming to Majuli all the way from the northern bank of Brahmaputra.

Majuli is divided into two blocks-Majuli and Ujani Majuli. There are 248 villages in the district. For the study purpose, the researcher has taken two villages namely-

- Meragarh
- Kalanibari



District map of Assam

Analysis:

“Majuli” – the word itself is a composition of two different word : ‘Ma’ means mother and ‘Juli’ means granary or storehouse. There are different meaning of the word Majuli according to different scholars. One such popular meaning of Majuli is “ the land between two parallel rivers”.

Nature has blessed Majuli with lush green forests, water bodies, and paddy fields. The island is also a birdwatcher’s paradise with over 200 species of birds can be found here. Due to its rich culture and natural beauty, Majuli becomes the most favorable place to visit for various Indian and foreign tourists, scholars and researchers. Therefore, Majuli is also favored by numerous animals because of its natural resources. Elephant is the most seen animal in Majuli district who visits this place once a year. They mostly visits the villages which are situated in the bank of river Brahmaputra. The selected villages are also situated in the bank of Brahmaputra.

The village, Meragarh has its own history. It is said that the Ahom king Pratap Singha built a rampart in Majuli called “Meragarh”. The nearby village of Meragarh is Kalanibari. Both the villages are huge producer of various crops and fruits which attracts different wild animals. There is also a huge forest area in front of these two villages. Elephants visits to this place in search of food and water. Human and elephant both become enemies due to fear of getting attacked by each other.

For this study, I approached 27 people and asked them various questions about their experiences of human-elephant conflict. The key findings of this research are discussed in detail below.

Findings:

The study brings out some important conclusions, they are:

- The first thing that came out of the study is that the local people are very much aware of the whole conflictual situation between human and elephants. In Indian society, elephants are considered as the symbol of Lord Ganesha (A Hindu God) ; therefore, the local community never tried to harm elephants. It is mainly because of their spiritual belief elephants are being protected.
- Government plays a crucial role in human-elephant conflict and also in wildlife protection. Government created a “Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change” to provide protection to wildlife. There are also some important acts such as “Wildlife Protection Act, 1972”, that provides protection to wild species and also ensure environmental and ecological security.
- There are also some constitutional provisions in India such as Article 48A and Article 51A that are related to issues of wildlife and their protection.
- Though we have all the opportunities provided by Indian Constitution or the government, yet we are still not successful in reducing human-elephant conflict. It is mainly because of the negligence of the people and also the department. Elephants need a huge amount of food and water which is not available in many places due to our mischievous actions. It is the prime reason behind human-elephant conflict.
- Simple methods like- providing forest guards, lightening, creating sounds by using drums etc. is not useful to mitigate such conflict. Local community is not satisfied with such action taken by the Forest Department.
- Local people explained horrible situation of human death as a result of human-elephant conflict in the nearby places of Meragarh, Kalanibari.
- Some long term effective action should be taken by the department, as for example- creating a separate food zone for elephants, provide protection to elephant corridors, minimal electric shock only to create fear among elephants, monitoring the developmental projects etc.
- The local people, knowledgeable person, various organisations and also the government should work together to reduce human-elephant conflict. For a better and peaceful life it is much needed, because human welfare and wellbeing is also a part of this.

Suggestions:

1. Government should introduce new policies and act to protect Elephants. The Forest department should take some useful initiative.
2. Providing proper knowledge about human-elephant conflict through social media, mass media and other platforms can be a great solution to reduce such kind of conflict. Because many of these conflicts happens due to lack of awareness of people.
3. Elephants need a huge amount of food and water, therefore, the forest department should create an extra food zone for the elephants.
4. One of the prime cause of human-elephant conflict is the developmental project taken by us. These projects are not good for the environment, animals, birds, and other species. Therefore, while working on those projects, a thorough process of monitoring should be done.
5. To solve the conflict between human and elephant, people should take both short term and long term actions. Small initiatives like providing forest guards, lightening through torch lights, minimal electric shocks etc. are also quite useful in some cases.
6. People should stop destroying elephant corridors in the name of development. It not only harms the elephants but also bring danger to us.

Conclusion:

Conflicts are never good, it always creates horrible situations. Human-Elephant conflict is becoming complex day by day and there is no single solution of this problem. Lots of strategies has been adopted in Assam to solve this problem but these are not sufficient. More observation and study is required to suggest some measures that are helpful to reduce human-elephant conflict. Protection of wildlife is one of our prime duty to maintain the balance of environment. The highlighted area of this study is to create awareness among the people and they should come together to reduce this conflict, because reduction of such serious problem is much needed to maintain peace and balance. However, this study shows that it is so called modernize “human being”, who is the primary cause behind all of those environmental degradation. People should be aware of what they are doing in the name of development and should give importance to the environment equally. Only then, this kind of conflict can be resolved.

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