

# The Tharu, the Tarai and the History of the Nepali Hattisar<sup>1</sup>

Piers Locke

The Nepali *hattisar* or elephant stable is an institution traditionally staffed by the Tharu, an ethnic group indigenous to the Tarai region (see Guneratne 2007). Historically, government elephant stables were found throughout the previously forested lowlands of Nepal, but today they are restricted to the national parks and wildlife reserves of the Tarai. The *hattisar* became an increasingly formalised institution with state funded staff, facilities and resources, and was the location for organising the capture, training and keeping of elephants.

The elephants that roamed the Tarai were highly prized royal property, infused with both divine and politico-economic significance, and the rulers of Nepal generously rewarded the overseers of elephant capture operations. While captured elephants represented a valuable commodity for trade and tribute in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, they were also kept for transport, haulage and agriculture. Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the rule of the Ranas, elephants became important for royal hunting expeditions (*rastriya shikar*), during which tigers, leopards, rhinos and bears were killed as trophies.

It is due to these various activities involving elephant catching and keeping that a tradition of expertise emerged that is now crucial for the management of Nepal's lowland national parks and protected areas. Elephant handling skills and knowledge have been passed down generations of Tharu men, who were recruited to work in the *hattisar* through networks of kinship and community. The social worlds of these elephant handlers were configured by the broader socio-economic context of the land tenure relations distinctive to the Tarai. This historical experience is also essential for an ethnographic understanding of the contemporary Nepali elephant stable. However, this relatively recent history is predicated on much older practices of captive elephant management in Nepal and throughout South Asia.

---

1 I am grateful to the Economic and Social Research Council of the UK for funding my doctoral research on Nepali captive elephant management.

### Fragments for an early history of elephant keeping in Nepal

It would seem that from at least the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE state-sponsored captive elephant management was established in territories that would be later subsumed by Prithvi Narayan Shah's Gorkhali kingdom. This is suggested by a report commissioned by the (former) Nepali Royal Palace that mentions the Licchavi King Manadeva (521-562 *bikram samvat*) building a bridge across the Gandaki River in order for him to transport hundreds of war elephants (Shrestha *et al* 1985). From its origins as a weapon of war in ancient times (see Kistler 2005), the elephant became a symbol of regal power, and the architectural edifices of the Malla dynasty, which superseded the Licchavis in the Kathmandu Valley, testify to the enduring significance of the elephant in this respect. Exemplifying this ceremonial significance, albeit from much later, is the 17<sup>th</sup> century stone sculpture of King Pratap Malla seated upon an elephant in Patan (an image of which is reproduced in WWF 2003: 22).

Indeed, the regal status of the elephant has persisted in Nepali culture, evident for example in the coronation of King Birendra and Queen Aishwarya Shah in 1975, when they processed on the back of a caparisoned elephant called Prem Prasad (WWF 2003:iii). The significance of elephants is further evident in their use as ritual payments (*dakshina*) to compensate priests performing highly polluting royal funeral rites. On the occasions of the deaths of King Tribhuvan in 1955, King Mahendra in 1972, and King Birendra and his son Dipendra in 2001, the performance of the *katto grahana* rite, 'the acceptance of disgraced food', required its Brahman practitioners to face banishment, leaving the Kathmandu valley on elephants (see Kropf 2002). In the most recent instance, I am told that the priest subsequently returned the elephant in exchange for a cash payment because the state could no longer spare one of its precious captive elephants.

The connection between elephants and the state is given further credence by the influence in Nepal of the *Gaja Shastra*. This genre of Sanskrit literature is concerned with the anatomy, behaviour and husbandry of elephants, and is typically associated with the treatises on statecraft known as *Artha Shastra*. Both the content and rhetorical forms one finds in texts like Nilakantha's *Matanga-Lila* and Palakapya's *Gaja Shastram* are evident in a Nepali veterinary treatise from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (see Locke 2008). This expert literature on elephant keeping, found throughout South Asia in various redactions, at least partially represented a codification of low

caste elephant handlers' practical knowledge (an argument first made by Franklin Edgerton in 1931), and is indicative of state involvement in the care of captive elephants (Locke 2008).

Regarding this relationship between elephants and the state, there is also evidence of their use as exchange items in tenurial relations between the Mughal Empire and the primarily hill-based polities that held jurisdiction over the Tarai (Ojha 1983: 21). Reconstructing the gruelling journey from Peking to Agra made by the Jesuit missionaries John Grueber and Albert D'Orville in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Wessels notes a reference by the French Orientalist Melchisédech Thévenot to the effect that the Kingdom of Morang in the eastern Tarai was supplying seven elephants for the Mughal captive elephant apparatus on an annual basis (Wessels 1924: 165). This tributary arrangement was later replicated by the British, who negotiated the same annual gift of captured elephants in exchange for returning Tarai lands to the new, expanded Gorkha state established by Prithvi Narayan Shah (Shrestha *et al* 1985).

As Dhriti Lahiri-Choudhary remarks: 'When the British took over from the Mughals, they accepted the place of the elephant in state pomp, the army, and the civil administration' (1989: 304). The British understood that the number and quality of elephants kept by the kingdom of Nepal, by Indian princes, and by the land-holding gentry was an important means of signifying high status. Learning from their imperial subjects, the British also adopted the elephant as a symbol of political display. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, British dignitaries had even begun to participate in royal elephant back hunts in Nepal as honoured guests of the Ranas.

However, it is important that we appreciate that elephants were not just used as prestigious vehicles or given in obeisance, but were also traded, generating significant revenue for Nepal as an export commodity. During the mid-nineteenth century, captured elephants were valued at 300 rupees each, and according to Kirkpatrick (1811: 17) about two to three hundred a year were being captured at the end of the eighteenth century. Similarly, Cavenagh reports the capture of a total of two hundred elephants in 1850 (1851: 72), which Edgerton (1852: 249) tells us were inspected by Jang Bahadur Rana, who established his own hereditary premiership after displacing the direct rule of the Shah dynasty in the wake of the Kot Massacre of 1846 (Stiller 1993: 79-81, Whelpton 2005: 46-47, Vaidya 2000). Those elephants that were deemed to be of inferior quality and of no use to the state were

to be sold in order to generate revenue (apparently they were evaluated with regard to the tufts of their tails). Arjun Guneratne notes that this export business was unsustainable because it left Nepal without adequate elephant resources, and that in 1892/3 the Nepali state sought permission from the British to carry out a *khora kheda* (an elephant hunt by the stockade method) in their former territory of Kumaon (now part of the Indian state of Uttarakhand) (Guneratne 2002: 30). This was to the west of Nepal, and had reverted to British control under the Treaty of Sagauli of 1816, a peace deal brokered after the Anglo-Gorkha war, a time when the Tarai itself was disputed territory (see Whelpton 2005: 42, Michael 2008). Guneratne further tells us that the British allowed the Nepalese the first 25 elephants free of royalties, and charged them 100 rupees for every additional captured elephant (2002: 30).

### **The Panjiar documents and the Tharu as the elephant handlers of the Tarai**

We can be certain that in Nepal almost all of the elephants involved in these transactions would have been captured by the Tharu, the largest *janajati* or ethnic group of the Tarai, who to this day remain very closely (but no longer exclusively) associated with Nepali elephant keeping. Thévenot's remark about tribute paid to the Mughals by the kingdom of Morang indirectly supports Giselle Krauskopff's claim that the Tharu have been involved with the capture, taming and keeping of elephants for at least 300 years (Krauskopff 2000: 42). The collection of royal documents gathered by Tej Narayan Panjiar over a period of 20 years represents one of the most important resources for constructing a history of captive elephant management in Nepal, albeit from a top-down perspective. Collated, translated and presented by Giselle Krauskopff, Pamela Meyer and Tek Bahadur Shrestha, the Panjiar documents provide a richer source of information than mere estimations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century elephant trade given by the likes of Kirkpatrick, Cavenagh and Egerton.

The Panjiar documents were all recovered from Tharu families, and are now held at the office of the Tharu Welfare Society in Kathmandu. They provide valuable material for reconstructing the relationship between the Nepali state and the Tarai-dwelling Tharu, revealing them to be pioneer cultivators and animal domesticators rather than savage inhabitants of primeval forest, as they have often been derisively characterised (Krauskopff

2000: 35). The collection is remarkable not only for the long term dedication of Tej Narayan Panjiar, but also because the documents, the oldest of which was issued by the King of Makwanpur in 1726 CE, have remained intact despite the humid, tropical climate of the Tarai. Of a total of 50 documents, seven pertain to matters of elephant management, revealing elephants as royal property, indicating that the state generously rewarded the capture of elephants with land grants, that some elephants were especially prized, that the local population was obliged to assist with elephant hunts, and that the *hattisar* functioned as an institution of the state.

The other documents in this collection are concerned mainly with land grants and other state ordained privileges such as rights to timber, the import of settlers from and the flight of peasants to India, then known by the derogatory term *Muglan* (Burghart 1995: 134). These official decrees also deal with taxes, pensions and legal issues such as fines, pardons and the adjudication of traditional rights. The elephant-related documents were recovered from the Tarai districts of Saptari, Mahottari, Bara, and Nawalparasi, localities in which *sarkari hattisars* (government stables) can no longer be found, but which still supply recruits for the remaining stables at Sauraha and Khorsor in Chitwan, Amlekhgunj in Parsa, Koshi Tappu on the Saptari/Sunsari border, Shivapur in Bardia, and Piparia in Kanchanpur.

### **Elephants as royal property**

The oldest of the elephant-related Panjiar documents is concerned with elephants as royal property, and dates to 1783 CE. This was shortly after Prithvi Narayan Shah founded the state of Nepal in 1769, which he ruled from Kathmandu and Nuvakot (see Burghart 1984: 111). In this early document from the district of Saptari, issued by the court of King Rana Bahadur Shah, a baby elephant captured in 1782 by Madhuram Chaudhari, the son of one Hem Chaudhari, was granted to the father to train and ride. This reminds us that all elephants captured in Nepal were the property of the king, and that the capture, training and use of these elephants was subject to state regulation. It indicates that elephants were utilised to meet the needs of locals as well as the state, and perhaps also that elephants could be kept in homesteads—a situation we still find among a few wealthy Tharu families (who acquired their privately owned elephants from India) in the districts of Parsa, Bara and Sarlahi, as well as in contemporary Karnataka in South India, where Lynette Hart reports village elephant keeping traditions

(Hart & Locke 2007: 510-515). Furthermore, Shrestha and Krauskopff claim that the gift of an elephant was probably not an uncommon form of compensation for services rendered (*jagir*) (Krauskopff & Meyer [eds] 2000: 121). Bearing the *thar*, or family name of Chaudhari, it is likely that these elephant capturers were also leaders of the local community who collected taxes on behalf of the state, a role within Tharu society that will be discussed later.

### **Prized elephants and rewards to their captors**

Other Panjiar documents tell us about the significance of elephant capture operations. Two documents from Bara, issued in 1820 and 1827 CE, are addressed to the father and son Daya and Kokil Raut. In the first of these documents, King Rajendra Bikram Shah bestows upon Daya Raut the land previously given to one Bandhu Raut, and a turban of honour (*pagari*) in reward for his service to the state in capturing and training elephants. The *pagari* was a headdress, most usually a turban adorned with silver ornaments, worn by high officials. Even if it was made of simple cloth this represented the receipt of royal favour. Daya Raut is urged to continue capture operations by both the *jaghiya* and *khori kheda* methods (the former entails a wild elephant being chased, lassoed and then tethered, whilst the latter entails herding multiple elephants into a prepared enclosure), to obey the instructions of the elephant stable manager (*daroga*), and to continue to enjoy the customary taxes and income from performing the elephant training function (*sidhali rautai*) (Krauskopff & Meyer [eds] 2000: 149).

In the 1827 document, issued to Daya's son Kokil Raut, we learn that Daya Raut was given Babhani village in Cherwant *praganna*. This gift was a *jagir*, giving him revenue-collecting privileges, a reward specifically for his presentation of an *ekdanta hattī*, or one-tusked elephant, to King Rajendra Bikram Shah during a royal visit to Hariharpur (Krauskopff & Meyer [eds] 2000: 150). A one-tusked elephant (which can only be male because female Asian elephants do not grow true tusks) was significant for its relevance to the lore of Ganesh, the elephant-headed Hindu deity. Renowned for his gluttony, it is told that Ganesh tripped over a log and split open his gut, spilling his internal organs, which he tied together, using a snake for a belt. Amused by his clumsy misfortune, Chandra, the moon, laughed at Ganesh, who snapped off one of his tusks in anger and hurled it at him (see Grimes

1995). This explains why Ganesh is typically depicted with only one tusk. The auspicious similarity between such an elephant and the revered Hindu god would signify a creature particularly suffused with divine substance.

The significance of the one-tusked elephant is also attested in the aforementioned Nepali veterinarian treatise (and the *Gaja Shastra* texts from which it borrows), where it is listed as the greatest of eight types (or castes) of elephant:

The one-tusked elephant is called the king of all the elephants... The heart of the king is fascinated by the sight of such an elephant. There is no other elephant equal to this one in this world. All problems will disappear in the presence of such an animal. Wherever the one-tusked elephant stays there will always be pleasure and prosperity.<sup>2</sup>

Shrestha and Krauskopff also tell us that in his renowned *Dibya Upadesh*, Prithvi Narayan Shah mentioned his desire to procure a one-tusked elephant from Digbhandan Sen, ruler of the kingdom of Makwanpur (Krauskopff & Meyer [eds] 2000: 150). The wild elephant that Daya Raut later caught, and for which he was awarded the turban of honour (*pagari*), was given the name Jala Prasad and was captured by means of a famous trained elephant called Sri Prasad. This elephant even warrants mention in Pandit Sundarananda's *Triratna Saundarya Gatha* (Vajracharya 1962). Said to command great respect, he was praised as one who could trap freely walking elephants as easily as Rahu (the eclipse) traps the moon and the sun (Krauskopff & Meyer [eds] 2000: 150).

In the course of my ethnographic research, I found that valued male elephants can still acquire a considerable reputation throughout the community of *hattisares* (elephant handlers) in the contemporary era, and that to be associated with a celebrated individual elephant as a part of its working team can confer a modicum of prestige upon a handler. Furthermore, Nepal's current elephant section officer (*adhikrit subba*) Rameshwor Chaudhary tells me that in his early career he always sought the challenge of working with difficult male elephants. This is because he knew that success in handling males, who can be particularly violent and

---

2 I am grateful to Geeta Manandhar for translating this untitled veterinary treatise believed to date to sometime in the 1920s, portions of which are probably very similar to Indra Bahadur Karki's *Gaja Bibaran Sangrah* of 1923.

unpredictable when in a state of 'musth' (*mada* in Nepali), would enhance his prospects of promotion.

Whilst Daya Raut had the good fortune to capture a one-tusked elephant, for which he was generously rewarded, Kokil Raut also benefited from his (presumably) inherited role as an overseer of elephant capture and training. In the same document that reminds him of the rewards his father received, he too is given an area of land toward the nearby village of Naraulkos, on land registered as recently as 1813/4. Kokil Raut's *jagir* was part of the reward given to his father, and this indicates the prestigious value accorded by the state to the capture of such a special elephant.

A third, related document further confirms this pattern of reward. Issued later in 1884, by which time the Shah kings' sovereignty was largely symbolic, this decree was issued on behalf of the Rana Prime Minister Ranodip Singh by King Prithvi Bir Bikram Shah, then only nine years old. It concerns Anup Raut, quite possibly a descendent of Daya and Kokil Raut, since he too is linked with Cherwant *praganna* in Bara district. In this document Anup Raut is given the title deeds to the village of Thaksaul in Cherwant *praganna* after capturing an elephant named Ranagambhir Gajahatti whilst participating in a royal elephant hunt at Khurahariya camp, Chitwan District, hosted by Ranodip Singh. Rather than the mere usufruct of *jagir* as land to manage for the state, this was a *birta* land grant, meaning that it was given by the state to an individual, usually on a tax-free and heritable basis, and could be subdivided, sold or mortgaged (Shrestha and Krauskopff in Krauskopff & Meyer [eds] 2000: 151).

Two key conclusions may be drawn from these documents. First, they hint at the pattern of land settlement that the state incentivised its revenue collectors to encourage (discussed below). Second, even if the hard work of capturing, driving and caring for elephants performed by the junior ranks of cleaner (*mahut*), grass-cutter (*pachuwa*) and capturer (*phanet*) was apparently of low status, even sometimes requiring forced labour (*jhara*), evidence suggests that the higher positions of *raut* and surely also *daroga* and *subba* were quite different. These personages received royal recognition and favour, and more importantly were able to establish themselves as landlords (either as holders of *jagir* or *birta* tenure, with the incentive to attract peasant cultivators). It is also significant that Daya and Kokil Raut are addressed by the name of the function they perform—the term for the overseer of elephant capture operations seems to serve as their *thar*, or family name.



### **Local obligations to provide labour for elephant hunts**

Another document from the collection, dated 1828 CE and from the district of Nawalparasi, suggests what elephant hunting activity meant to local people who did not have land-holding privileges. In this document, the court of King Rajendra Bikram Shah issues a response to a plea made by the *chaudhari* (the head of an administrative district with tax-collecting duties), the *kanugoye* (a functionary who maintained cadastral maps of the extent, value and ownership of land), and the subjects of Nawalpur. When a *hatti kheda* or elephant hunt occurred the local people were obliged to provide their labour (*jhara*), but if in any one year a hunt did not take place they were instead obliged to pay 600 rupees in tax. This led to some villagers fleeing to Latthepar and to Ramnagar in British controlled India. With fewer people working the land, government revenue was reduced and therefore also the income of the *chaudhari* and the *kanugoye*. In response, the royal court agreed to an exemption of the tax in return for bringing subjects back to cultivate the land and thereby raise taxable revenue (Krauskopff & Meyer [eds] 2000: 167).

According to Shrestha and Krauskopff, this was the latest in a succession of complaints by headmen and tenants about excessive tax. Considering the abundance of land and the scarcity of labour, the government had to be mindful of peasants fleeing. The logic behind taxing them in non-hunt years was that they would be free to use the elephants for their own needs (as a means of transport and for agricultural activities), but clearly this privilege was insufficient and the taxation strategy resulted only in unbearable hardship. The loss of revenue to the Nepali government was enough for it to cancel this tax obligation (Krauskopff & Meyer [eds] 2000: 167).

The freedom for locals to utilise elephants when they were not required for royal hunts implies a degree of mutuality between the *hattisar* and local villages that is no longer found today. During my field research in 2001 and 2003-4 I was told of prior times when elephants were used to plough fields, but by the time of my first visit to Chitwan in 2001, only buffalo or motorised tractors were used for these tasks. Similarly, I was told of elephants hauling timber from the forests in the days before the national parks. Nowadays villagers in the Chitwan area still live in fairly close proximity to elephants, but they tend to be only indirectly dependent on them, as instruments for protected area management and as a key attraction for the touristic desire to view jungle wildlife, which

fuels the local nature tourism economy in and around the national park.

The 1828 document also illustrates the hardships to which Tharu farmers were subject. However, there was always the option of fleeing elsewhere and re-establishing livelihoods by clearing forest for cultivation. In the 20th century, with available land becoming scarce, in-migration increasing and government restrictions on freedom of movement, the economic condition of the Tharu worsened. The condition of poverty, especially for those without tenancy rights (*bahariya*), whose only other option was to work as day labourers, continued to provide Tharu men with the incentive to become elephant handlers, although joining the elephant stable was also a popular option for boys from wealthy families who wanted to rebel against the expectations of family and school. With this job came a monthly salary, and rights to a half-salary pension (*nivrttibharan* or *pensan*) upon retirement at 58, a form of guaranteed employment known as *sthayai*. After 1999 however, *hattisares* were employed on *asthayai* terms, i.e. on a contractual basis without long-term guarantees, specifically that of a pension (see Locke 2007: 143-144).

The role of elephants in the social and economic life of people in the Nepal Tarai, as suggested by the Panjjar documents, contrasts sharply with the elephant catching operations of Mughal and British India in the Bengal-Assam hinterland. In the Nepal Tarai the local populace generally seemed willing to bear their labour obligations to support *shikar* events, but not the tax obligations in the absence of these royal hunts. However, in the weakly controlled Bengali frontier districts, the imposition of compulsory labour on hill tribes like the Hajong to catch wild elephants sometimes resulted in revolt against the imperial administration (Schendel 1985, Bhadra 1983). Of course, in the Tharu case, compulsory labour (*jhara*) was in service to royal elephant-back hunts, which were events of pomp and circumstance affording opportunities for tips (*baksis*), whilst in the latter locals were forced into dangerous activities from which they benefited very little.

### **The hattisar as an institution of the state**

The final Panjjar documents under consideration are from the era of Rana rule and come from Mahottari in 1867 and 1877 CE. The latter document seems to be a replication of the earlier document, but this time it is addressed to a stable manager by name; Subba Dewal (where *subba* generically indicates a managerial role, similar to that of the rather more

*hattisar*-specific designation *daroga*). Here the state acknowledges its concern about serious reports of financial mismanagement at the *hattisar*.

Fraud is implied, since the letter claims that despite the *hattisar* presumably receiving its annual dispensation of state funds, the elephants had not been properly fed, which resulted in them starving, eating earth and becoming sick. This implies the existence of a system of financial provision by which a *subba* would be responsible for purchasing food and resources. In the contemporary elephant stable we find a similar system, in which the Elephant Section Officer is responsible for employing a *thekadar* (contractor) who supplies the supplementary diet of salt, molasses and unhusked rice for the elephants as well as rations for the men. In addition, the stable employees had not received their wages, which in the contemporary *sarkari hattisar* are often dispensed by a *khardar*, or administrative officer, typically a literate non-Tharu. To prevent further incidents of financial mismanagement, the document stipulates that the Military and Audit Offices should check all future receipts and issue salaries, thereby curtailing the administrative autonomy of the *hattisar*. This might also be taken to indicate the state's unwillingness to place its trust in exclusively Tharu institutions (as the *hattisar* and elephant capturing operations seemed to be), preferring instead to administer through an additional bureaucratic level of accountability, staffed by intermediaries of a caste and ethnicity whose interests were less likely to diverge from its own. For the Tharu were low status subjects on the periphery of the kingdom, and if tax demands were too high they could migrate elsewhere and begin agricultural production anew.

Although records do attest to the use of occasional forced labour for elephant management in the Tarai (Narharinath 1966: 433 & 494, Regmi 1984: 198-199 and Krausskopf & Meyer [eds] 2000: 144), the 1877 document also indicates that stables were now generally staffed by paid employees, a situation that became more systematically regularised over time. Captive elephants played an important role in the local economy, facilitating regal hunting expeditions and the capture of wild elephants, as well as providing a source of transport and haulage. Again, this is quite a contrast to the case of elephants in Bengal and Assam under Mughal and British rule, where the locals' role was to provide compulsory labour for the capture and trade in elephants, but not for their long-term care, since stables were maintained elsewhere, in imperial centres rather than in the hinterlands where they were captured (see Schendel 1985, Bhadra 1983).

Nonetheless, as already indicated, along with timber, the elephant was also a lucrative export commodity in the Nepal Tarai (see also Olyphant 1852: 52). With the assistance of captive elephants, wild elephants were captured from the jungle by the professional capturers and trainers, the *phanets* (called *phandi* in India), under the supervision of the *raut*, the overseer of these operations. Once caught and subjected to training at the stable, managed by the *subba* and the *daroga* (the latter an inferior rank in the contemporary *sarkari hattisar*), they could serve as gifts of royal largesse for the kings and courtiers of neighbouring kingdoms, as well as compensation for the services of loyal subjects, or even exchanged for horses from India (Shrestha and Krauskopff in Krauskopff & Meyer [eds] 2000: 144). Thus these records also provide insights into the origin and development of the system of ranks and roles that organise labour in the contemporary *sarkari hattisar* (see Locke 2007: 113-157).

### **Environment and land tenure in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Tarai**

The Panjiar documents indicate how practices of captive elephant management were regulated within the broader context of relations between the Tharu, land, and the state. Evolving land tenure regimes and their organising political structures help to account for the socio-economic and environmental situation in which Nepali captive elephant management developed. By the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an era characterised by malaria, extensive forestation and low population density in the Tarai, districts like Chitwan, which were favoured by the Ranas as hunting reserves, were divided into five revenue collecting sections or *praganna*, each further divided into a number of *mauja*, each consisting of one or more villages and hamlets. The *praganna* was under the authority of a revenue-collecting functionary called a *jimidar*, usually a Tharu, who took the title *chaudhari*. In addition to juridical and revenue-collecting functions, a *jimidar* in Chitwan was also very much involved in the rituals of community life (Guneratne 1996, Guneratne 2002: 107).

In Dang, by contrast, most *jimidar* were high-caste non-Tharus. This situation of ethnic domination would provide the conditions for the emergence of BASE (Backwards Society Education), a contemporary organisation dedicated to the uplift of disadvantaged groups like the Tharu (see Krauskopff 2007). Historically, the Tharu were legally subservient to the twice-born Bahun and Chhetri castes. This was a result of their

designation as impure *masine matwali*, or 'enslaveable alcohol drinkers' in the Muluki Ain of 1854, the legal document which outlined a state-decreed caste system (see Höfer 1979, Guneratne 1999). Not repealed until 1964, this system of ordering social groups (*jat*) into ranked categories left lasting legacies of social, political and economic inequality, with consequences for relations between contemporary Tharu *hattisares* and the higher status vets and wardens of the national parks.

The Rana state had introduced the *jimidari* system in 1861, effectively grafting it on to the pre-existing hierarchy of authority, as represented by the *chautariya*, or village head; the *mahato*, or head of a *mauja*; and most significantly the *chaudhari* or head of a *praganna*, to which the post of *jimidar* was analogous. So initially, in a region where high caste outsiders from the hills rarely ventured, this middleman between the state and civil society was a part of the autochthonous social hierarchy. However, because it was a position with the in-built opportunity to garner wealth, it soon attracted hardy, profiteering outsiders, particularly in Dang, where the incidence of malaria was less rampant (Muller-Böcker 1999: 35). In further consolidating its control of elites in peripheral zones, the Rana regime intended the *jimidar* to serve as much as an agricultural entrepreneur as a revenue-collector, responsible for recruiting settlers or tenants (known as *raiti*) to cultivate the land and thereby produce agricultural surplus for state revenues. To do this, he had the power not only to grant subsidies in the form of temporary suspensions of revenue commitments whilst the land was converted to agricultural production, but also to supply seeds for planting (Dahal 1983: 2). Just as the state encouraged agricultural activity through the entrepreneurial proxy of the *jimidar*, so it stimulated the elephant capturing business through the figure of the *raut*. Taken together, these functionaries may be seen as complementary actors in an effort by the regime to maximise the economic benefits of the Tarai region.

The *jimidari* initiative built upon the concerted attempt at reclamation and settlement of the Tarai that the Shah kings had previously pursued between the period of unification and the Anglo-Gorkha war (i.e. 1769-1815), when the Tarai additionally served a strategic role as a forested and malarial barrier to territorial incursion by the British (see Locke 2007: 81-83 and Michael 2008). The settlement imperative is evident in a 1798 decree issued by King Rana Bahadur Shah to send people to cultivate Tarai land in the districts of Saptari, Mahottari, Bara, Parsa, Rautahat and Morang (Dahal 1983: 2). However, after

the relative failure of such programmes of compulsion, the Shah kings and their Rana usurpers pursued an alternative policy of incentivisation. The state began to issue dispensations to civil and military officials, members of the nobility, chieftains of vanquished principalities and, as we have seen, even the overseers of elephant capture operations. Issued with legal rights to their own land (*birta* proprietary tenure) or to manage land on behalf of the state in lieu of salary (*jagir* service tenure), they would attract settlers to cultivate wasteland and virgin forests, from which both the state and its agents would derive revenue (Ojha 1983: 24). The outbreak of famine in the area of the modern states of Bengal and Bihar during 1769 and 1770 had forced many subsistence cultivators to become refugees. This helped to ameliorate the Tarai's manpower shortage, making it easier for elephant capturers like Anup Raut to attract settlers (Dahal 1983: 2).

The *jimidar*, as the new functionary of the Ranas, had greater powers to advance their economic ambitions than his *chaudhari* predecessor. He had the additional authority to extend credit to settlers who had to expend labour on clearing land before they could reap a harvest. However, in the inner-Tarai district of Chitwan, sheltered by the Churiya Hills and known for its particularly high degree of malarial contagion, an especially low population density and a lack of immigration precluded the formation of new *mauja*, thereby limiting the entrepreneurial function of the *jimidar* (Guneratne 2002: 107). None the less, we must not ignore the enticing privileges available to the *jimidar*. He was allowed to retain a percentage of taxes in compensation for his revenue collecting activities, and he had his own dispensation of land (*jirayat*), on which he could summon all able-bodied persons to work during planting and harvesting. This compulsory or corvée labour was called *begari*, although in the local vernacular of the Chitwan Tharu it was referred to as *jharahi saghauni*, or 'to be forced to help' since one could not work on one's own fields until work on the *jimidar's* had been completed (Muller-Böker 1999: 36).

### **Captive elephants and royal hunting in the Tarai**

Remaining sparsely populated until fairly recently, the Tarai, and Chitwan in particular, was highly prized as a hunting reserve for ruling elites (Guneratne 2002: 107). In this regard a key resource for a history of captive elephant management in Nepal is Evelyn Arthur Smythies' *Big Game Shooting in Nepal* (1942). Smythies was Chief Conservator of Forests for the

area of British India that would later become Uttar Pradesh and also served as a forest advisor to the government of Nepal. His book is primarily a hagiographic account of the hunting exploits of the Nepali ruler of the time, Sri Tin Maharaja Juddha Shamshere Jung Bahadur Rana, as he honorifically addresses him, who is claimed to have killed over 550 tigers during a period of 33 years (Smythies 1942: 38).

Smythies recounts the hunting trip attended by King George V of Britain in 1911, for which an incredible 600 elephants were assembled, roads built, and a special camp constructed at Kasara (which now serves as the headquarters of the Chitwan National Park, and a stable for quarantined elephants infected with tuberculosis, a case of zoonotic disease transmission posing serious problems for elephants throughout South Asia).<sup>3</sup> During this trip 39 tigers, 18 rhinos, two bears and several leopards were reportedly shot over the course of 11 days. The Prince of Wales (the future King Edward VIII of Britain) was hosted in 1921, and the preparations for his visit entailed the construction of 36 miles of motorable road from Bhikna Thori at the Indian border (the site of a Newar trading post), the installation of 32 miles of telephone line, and the assembling of 428 elephants (Raj 1995: 3). However, the tally of prey for the hunt of 1938, at which the Viceroy of India, Lord Linlithgow, was the guest of honour, was perhaps the greatest: 120 tigers, 38 rhinos, 27 leopards, and 15 bears were reportedly shot, the majority of them from elephant back (Muller-Böker 1999: 37). On this latter occasion a wild tusker persistently caused trouble until he was eventually captured and presumably subjected to training (Smythies 1942: 94).

Smythies' book is particularly notable for its descriptions of the ring technique of hunting, which is considered unique to Nepal, and which was most likely inspired by the *khori kheda* elephant capturing method in which elephants would be herded into specially prepared enclosures. In the ring method, the enclosure was substituted by an almost impenetrable circle of about 300 elephants, thereby providing a space within which to fix and shoot prey from the back of an elephant chosen for its fearlessness. Whilst this ring technique was subsequently adapted for the purposes of the Chitwan rhino translocations between 1986 and 2003 (see Dinerstein 2003,

---

3 A pioneer elephant tuberculosis programme is currently underway in Nepal, managed by the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) and the National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC) in conjunction with Elephant Care International (ECI). See: <http://www.elephantcare.org/tbshort.htm>.

and Dugas & Locke 2007), far fewer elephants must have been used owing to the decreasing numbers of available captive elephants in Nepal.<sup>4</sup>

### **The last hattisare from the age of shikar**

So far, this attempt at reconstructing a history of Nepali captive elephant management (*hatti vyavasthapan*) has relied on documentary materials, but during field research I encountered a man who represented a living connection to both this age of *shikar*, and to the times when elephant handlers could receive generous royal rewards. As the last of the *hattisares* to benefit from land grants and royal largesse, it was a privilege for me to meet Bhagu Tharu in his later years. Generally known as Bhagu Subba or even ‘the King’s mahout’, this venerable informant was famous for saving King Mahendra from attack by a tiger that lunged at him while he was riding on the back of an elephant driven by Bhagu. This event secured a legendary reputation for Bhagu. It is rumoured that the King asked Bhagu what he would like in reward, and that besides requesting a beautiful, fair-skinned *pahari* wife from the hills, as he jovially told me, others claim he also asked for Bharatpur airport! Whilst this audacious request was not granted, I am told that he did receive a sizeable reward of land.

Bhagu was also a participant in the *rastriya shikar* hosted by King Mahendra for Queen Elizabeth II of Britain in 1960, an event he fondly remembered for the generous tips (*baksis*) he received. Bhagu claimed that for this occasion a grand total of 335 elephants was assembled (for more on big game hunting in Chitwan, see Oldfield 1974[1880]: 201, Kinloch 1885, Landon 1976[1928] II: 150, Shaha 1970: 2). He also recalled a further innovation in the ring hunting developed by the Ranas. This was the application of white cloths to further secure the perimeter of the elephant ring, a technique later used in the project that translocated rhinos from Chitwan to Suklaphanta and Bardia in the western Tarai, which can be seen in photographs in the visitor centre of the Biodiversity Conservation Center in Sauraha. In Bhagu’s remarkable career, he climbed the ranks from a lowly *mahut* all the way to *adhikrit subba*, the chief elephant officer, the nominal head of all of Nepal’s *sarkari hattisars*. As a retired handler (*bhupu hattisare*) and after his *adhikrit* successor Rameshwor Chaudhary helped

---

4 WWF-Nepal recently reported 85 government-owned elephants and 89 privately-owned elephants (2003: 11), although at the time of writing this total has now risen to 236.



submit an account of his achievements to the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC), Bhagu was given the honorific title of *ajivan subba*, or 'subba for life', a position which ensured him a full salary until his death in 2006.

### **Subsequent developments and the importance of elephants**

We have seen that the elephant represents a significant figure in relations between the Tharu and the state. Prized as both valued commodity and sacred creature, the elephant was emblematic of the Tarai regions, and during the 19<sup>th</sup> century captive elephant management became a key component in the political economy of the Tarai. The Tharu were not just a source of agricultural revenue. They became expert guardians of a very special kind of royal property, wild and captive alike, providing gifts of fealty by which Nepal mediated relations with its imperial neighbours to the south, and an export commodity for generating foreign revenue. In addition, the Tharu provided the human resources for regal events utilising elephants, engaging in activities that for the higher ranking, favoured few could bring great prestige and material reward.

In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after the Ranas were deposed and King Tribhuvan Shah reinstated (see Whelpton 2005: 68-72), the patrimonial kingdom began to give way to the modern state, now opened to the wider world and tentatively embracing ideologies of democracy and development (see Bista 1991). In this context, under the rule of Tribhuvan's son Mahendra, what we might call 'the age of conservation' emerged. In this era, which will in due course form the subject of another historical essay, malaria eradication, road building, in-migration and deforestation transformed the Tarai, and a system of protected forest areas emerged (see Locke 2007: 86-89). A consequence of the shift from *shikar* to conservation was that the honorary rewards of elephant handling granted by kings and enjoyed by the likes of Bhagu declined, and were replaced by purely salaried relations with the state as the *sarkari hattisar* became an adjunct of the new Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC).

As hunting reserves made the transition to conservation areas, King Mahendra also gave permission for the establishment of the first safari resort, which offered tourists elephant-back jungle expeditions to view Chitwan's megafauna. Tiger Tops, founded by the hunter John Coapman in 1963, was the first of several resorts with their own elephant stables

to be granted a license to operate in what became the Chitwan National Park. Then, in 1974 a few elephants were acquired for the Smithsonian Institute's Tiger Ecology Project. At the conclusion of this project, the elephants remained to facilitate conservation research in the *hattisar* at what became the Biodiversity Conservation Centre (BCC). After 1975 the Nepal government no longer permitted the capture of wild elephants due to its obligations as a signatory to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). However, it still needed to maintain its captive elephant population, and in 1986 Nepal initiated a bold experiment in captive breeding. This was the Khorsor Elephant Breeding Center, which Bhagu Subba helped build, and which successfully bred elephants under the management of his successor, Rameshwor Chaudhary.

Khorsor became the largest *sarkari hattisar*, and the last decade has seen extensive infrastructure improvements there, including a visitor centre. Popular with tourists keen to see baby elephants, this has helped consolidate its role in the tourist economy of Sauraha. In 2009 Khorsor made the news around the world for the very rare birth of twin elephants born to Devi Kali, which were named Ram and Laxman. In addition to the *sarkari hattisar* in Chitwan, smaller hotels in Sauraha also began to keep or lease an increasing number of elephants from India, operating outside the park in the community-controlled forests of the Buffer Zone, leading to a parallel tradition of elephant keeping practices quite unlike those of the larger and distinctly Nepali *sarkari hattisar*.

Clearly, government support has been crucial for the professionalisation of elephant keeping in the Tarai and the development of the *hattisar* as a regimented institution. A system of clearly defined ranks and roles developed with its own chain of command, elephant care specialists, and associated administrative and service functionaries. By virtue of its role in facilitating royal hunting events and elephant capture operations a total institution was forged with a distinctive occupational sub-culture in which human lives revolve around the care of ritually venerated elephants. This was an institution that was easily redeployed for the new imperatives of protected area management and nature tourism, although the private sector plays the dominant role in this latter regard. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the *hattisar* has also become subject to the attentions of INGOs concerned with the health and welfare of captive elephants.

However, the history of the Tharu, the Tarai and the *hattisar* makes

no sense without some appreciation of the status of the elephant as a ceremonial animal associated with political power, as a very large mammal with which humans develop intimate relations of companionship, and as a being representing the instantiation of divinity. In other words, elephants must be understood not only as animals, but also as persons and as gods. Much more can be said about the complex cultural meanings of and relations with the elephant in Nepal, but that too is the subject of another essay.

### References

- Bhadra, G. 1983. 'Two frontier uprisings in Mughal India'. In *Subaltern Studies II: Writings on South Asian history and society*, edited by Ranajit Guha, pp. 43-59. London: Oxford University Press.
- Bista, D.B. 1991. *Fatalism and Development: Nepal's struggle for modernization*. Patna: Orient Longman.
- Burghart, R. 1984. 'The formation of the concept of nation-state in Nepal'. *Journal of Asian Studies* 44(1): 101-125.
- Burghart, R. 1995. 'The category "Hindu" in the political discourse of Nepal'. In *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity*, edited by Vasudha Dalmia and Heinrich von Stietencron, pp. 129-141. Delhi: Sage.
- Cavenagh, O. 1851. *Rough Notes on The State of Nepal, Its Government, Army and Resources*. Calcutta: W. Palmer, Military Orphan Press.
- Dahal, D.R. 1983. 'Economic development through indigenous means: a case of Indian migration in the Nepal Terai'. *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* 11(1): 1-20.
- Dinerstein, E. 2003. *The Return of The Unicorns: The natural history and conservation of the greater one-horned rhinoceros*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Dugas, M. & P. Locke. 2007. 'Servants of Ganesh: Inside the elephant stable' (ethnographic documentary film) Octapixx Worldwide.
- Edgerton, F. 1931. *The Elephant Lore of The Hindus: The elephant-sport (matangalila) of Nilakantha*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Egerton, F. 1852. *Journal of a Winter's Tour in India with a Visit to The Court of Nepal*. London: John Murray.
- Grimes, J.A. 1995. *Ganapati: Song of the self*. Albany: SUNY Press.

- Guneratne, A. 1996. 'The tax-man cometh: the impact of revenue collection on subsistence strategies in Chitwan Tharu Society'. *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 1(1): 5-35.
- Guneratne, A. 1999. 'The modernising Matwalis: caste, class and status among the Tharus of Chitwan. In *Nepal: Tharu and Tarai neighbours*, edited by Harald Skar, pp. 159-173. Kathmandu: Biblioteca Himalayica.
- Guneratne, A. 2002. *Many Tongues, One People: The making of Tharu identity in Nepal*. London: Cornell University Press.
- Guneratne, A. 2007. 'The Tharu of Chitwan, Nepal'. In *Disappearing Peoples? Indigenous groups and ethnic minorities in South and Central Asia*, edited by Barbara Brower and Barbara Johnston, pp. 91-106. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press.
- Hamilton, F. 1971 (1819). *An Account of The Kingdom of Nepaul; and of the territories annexed to this dominion by the House of Gorkha*. New Delhi: Bibliotheca Himalayica.
- Hart, L. & P. Locke. 2007. 'Nepali and Indian mahouts and their unique relationships with elephants'. In *Encyclopedia of Human-Animal Relationships: A global exploration of our connections with animals (volume two)*, edited by Marc Bekoff, pp. 510-515. Westport: Greenwood Publishing.
- Höfer, A. 1979. *The Caste Hierarchy and The State in Nepal: A study of the Muluki Ain of 1854*. Kathmandu: Himal Books.
- Kinloch, A. 1885. *Large Game Shooting in Tibet, The Himalayas, and Northern India*. Calcutta: Thatcher Spink & Co.
- Kirkpatrick, W. 1969 (1811). *An Account of the Kingdom of Nepaul. Being the substance of observations made during a mission to that country in the year 1793*. Delhi: Bibliotheca Himalayica.
- Kistler, J.M. 2005. *War Elephants*. London: University of Nebraska Press.
- Krauskopff, G 2000, 'From jungle to farms: a look at Tharu history'. In *The Kings of Nepal and The Tharu of The Tarai; The Panjjar collection of fifty royal documents issued from 1726 to 1971*, edited by Giselled Krauskopff & Pamela Meyer, pp. 25-48. Los Angeles: Rusca Press.
- Krauskopff, G. 2007. 'An "indigenous minority" in a border area: Tharu ethnic associations, NGOs, and the Nepalese state. In *Resistance and The State: Nepalese Experiences*, edited by David Gellner, pp. 199-243. New Delhi: Social Science Press.
- Krauskopff, G. & P. Meyer (eds) 2000. *The Kings of Nepal and the Tharu of the*

- Tarai; The Panjar collection of fifty royal documents issued from 1726 to 1971.* Los Angeles: Rusca Press.
- Kropf, M. 2002. 'Katto khuvaune: two Brahmins for Nepal's departed kings'. *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* 23: 56-85.
- Lahiri-Choudhary, D.K. 1989. 'The Indian Elephant in a Changing World'. In *Contemporary Indian Tradition*, edited by Carla Borden. Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press.
- Landon, P. 1928 (1976). *Nepal Vol. I/II*. Kathmandu.
- Locke, P. 2007. *History, Practice, Identity: An institutional ethnography of elephant handlers in Chitwan, Nepal*. University of Kent Ph.D Thesis.
- Locke, P. 2008. 'Captive elephant management, the Tharu and the Nepali state'. *IIAS Newsletter* 49: 14-15.
- Michael, B. 2009, 'Spatiality, power and state-making in the organization of territory in colonial South Asia: the case of the Anglo-Gorkha frontier, 1740-1816'. In *Boundless Worlds: An Anthropological Approach to Movement*, edited by Peter Kirby, pp. 45-68. Oxford: Bergahn.
- Muller-Böker, U. 1999. *The Chitawan Tharus in Southern Nepal: An ethnoecological approach*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.
- Naraharinath, Y. 1966. *Itihas prakasma, sandhi patra sangraha, bhag 1 (In the Light of History, collection of treaties, Part 1)*. Kathmandu: Dang Religious Conference.
- Ojha, D. 1983. 'History of land settlement in Nepal Tarai'. *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* 11(1): 21-44.
- Oldfield, H. 1974 (1880). *Sketches From Nepal Vol I/II*. Delhi.
- Olyphant, L. 1852. *A Journey to Kathmandu (or The Nepaulese Ambassador at Home)*. New York: D. Appleton and Company.
- Raj, P. 1995. *Royal Chitwan National Park in Nepal*. Kathmandu: Nabeen Publications.
- Regmi, M.C. 1984. *The State and Economic Surplus: Production, trade and resource mobilisation in early 19th century Nepal*. Kathmandu: Nath Publishing House.
- Schendel, W. 1985. "'Madmen" of Mymensingh: peasant resistance and the colonial process in eastern India, 1824 to 1833'. *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 22(2): 139-173.
- Shaha, R. 1970. *Notes on Hunting and Wildlife Conservation in Nepal*. Kathmandu: Siddhanta Shaha.
- Shrestha, M. & K Dhakal, & K Shrestha. 1985 (vs 2042). *Hatti vyavasthapan*

- yojana tarujma pratibedan (Report on Planning for Elephant Management)*. Kathmandu: Janchbujh Kendra Vibhag, Raj Darbar.
- Smythies, E.A. 1942. *Big Game Shooting in Nepal*. Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co.
- Stiller, L. 1993. *Nepal: Growth of a nation*. Nepal: Human Resources Development Center.
- Vaidya, T.R. 2000. 'The Kot massacre: a critical assessment'. *Voice of History* 15(1): 1-15.
- Vajracharya, D. (ed.) 1962. *Pandit sundarananda virachit triratna saundarya gatha (History Composed by Pandit Sundarananda)*. Kathmandu: Nepal Sanskritik Parishad.
- Wessels, C. 1924. *Early Jesuit Travellers in Central Asia 1603-1721*. New Delhi: Book Faith India.
- Whelpton, J. 2005. *A History of Nepal*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- WWF-Nepal. 2003. *Hattisars: Managing domesticated elephants in Nepal*. Kathmandu.