Local Celebrities – Stories of elephant personalities in the Gudalur Region of the Nilgiris, South India

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Abstract: India is home to about 60% of the world's Asian Elephants, and only 22% of its range is within legally protected areas. The future of this species arguably hinges on its ability to share space with people. But the majority of research in the field field is by biologists studying elephants in "pristine wilderness" landscapes; much less is known about elephants living alongside people. The social sciences are witnessing a growing interest in elephants, with multi-species ethnography, animal, hybrid, more-than-human geography and even ethno-elephantology, but methods remain a key challenge. Social scientists lack the skills and training required for tracking, observing and understanding wild elephants.

Over the course of the last year, we have been working with local communities and forest department field staff in the Nilgiris, to get them to identify and relate to individual elephants rather than the species has a whole. We developed the relevant training material to identify individuals based on physical characteristics, but found local people already have intimate knowledge of some of the charismatic elephants that are well known in the region. I present some of these stories of individual elephant personalities, and discuss the wider implication of this work for elephant ethnographies.

Background: understanding the human-elephant interface

The problem of the human-elephant shared space is very relevant across India, and perhaps much of the world. India is home to more than half of the world's Asian elephants, and about 80% of their home range is outside protected areas, living alongside people. The future of the animal arguably hinges on their ability to share space with people (Rangarajan et al. 2010). But the majority of the studies in ecology and elephant behaviour have been in "pristine" forest environments, in most part ignoring their interaction with people (See Lewis 2003 for a more detailed discussion). The wider practice of nature conservation has been dominated by the natural sciences, and there has been criticism of the lack of a "human dimension" to conservation (Knight 2000), with the need for an "interdisciplinary" approach being well articulated (see discussion between Redford, Lele and Igoe 2011 in the journal *Orxy*). While there has since been some progress on understanding the human dimension (Redpath et al. 2013, Dickman 2010), studying elephant behaviour has remained firmly within the realm of the natural sciences. Most work has been within the Darwinian framework, where all elephant behaviour is explained by deterministic processes like resource requirements, fitness and a survival instinct. The methods used and questions asked are still very similar to those used by the pioneers in the field of ethology (Tinbergen 1953).

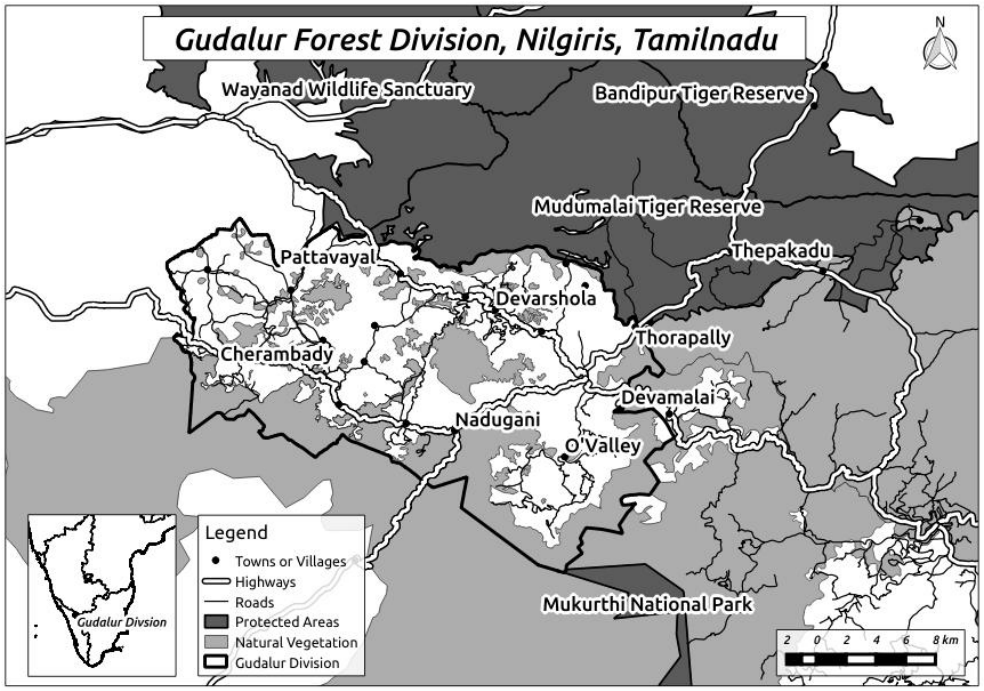
The social sciences have also seen significant engagement with animals, particularly in the last decade with the "animal turn" from the mid 1990s, that "explores the complex nexus of spatial relations between people and animals" (Wolch and Emel 1998:110). To study animals not just in terms of their influence on human societies and culture, but to examine the lived experiences of the animals themselves. This work differs from the natural science approach in that animals are assumed to be thinking, sentient beings with agency, where decisions are made based on thought and cognition, and not just on "instinct" from the Darwinian sociobiology framework. This newer approach arguably forms the basis of more-than-human geography or animal geography, hybrid geography and even multi-species ethnography (Whatmore 2002, Kirksey and Helmreich 2010, Buller 2013). And elephants are playing a key role in this animal turn, figuring in much of the "more-than-human geography" literature (Lorimer 2010, Barua 2014, Whatmore 2002a).

These two different strands of research run almost parallel to each other, without any significant interaction. The key hindrance in better integration is perhaps the epistemological differences. The behavioural work in the natural sciences relies on the positivist approach – based on empirical evidence and quantifiable data. Researchers aim to be objective, and distance themselves from the animals they study so that their presence does not influence the animals' behaviour, ignoring the interactions they have with the animals they study. While the "animal turn" in the social sciences focuses more on an interpretivist or critical approach, which is more qualitative, where researchers are encouraged to recognise their subjectivity and focus on the relations with the animals they study.

Given this dichotomy, methods and field work for interdisciplinary understanding of elephants in their interactions with people is a challenge. Recent advances in the natural sciences – technologies for tracking, communication and genetics – could be very useful in conducting animal ethnographies. But the reliance on ethologist gatekeepers is still considered a problem, where social scientists could learn more from interacting with the animals directly (Hodgetts and Lorimer 2014). Other speakers at this conference have also noted the challenges in "multi-species methodologies" fieldwork, where social scientists lack the skills and training required to observe and make sense of wild elephants (Keil and Locke, on the AES Engagement Blog, 2015).

Over the last five years, through The Shola Trust, a local conservation organisation I helped set up, we have been working on trying to better understand this human-elephant interface, and find ways in which people and elephants can share space in the Nilgiris, South India. Our challenge was to use a mix of methods, without limiting ourselves to any one framework, to understand better the lived experiences of elephants that live largely outside protected areas – in the Gudalur Forest Division. Given my background I'm more inclined towards understanding elephants as thinking sentient beings and the social science approach. But at the same time I appreciate the rigour of the natural sciences (or more traditional ethnographies) and don't believe we can "know" the elephants till we've "studied" them for at least a year. We don't have a hypothesis or questions, but are trying to spend as much time observing and getting to know the elephants as individuals and families, their different personalities and possibly "cultures".

The Region



Any attempt to understand how people and elephants interact cannot be separated from

the history and geography of the space that they share, so I start with a brief description of the region. The Gudalur forest division is a part of the Nilgiri District of Tamilnadu in South India. It covers about 500 sq km, with patches of forests, large tea and coffee plantations and numerous small land holdings. It is home to about 230,000 people and 100 elephants. The region is surrounded by more intact forests, with the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve to the North, the Nilgiri North and South Divisions to the East, and the Nilambur Forests to the South, cumulatively a part of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve – one of the largest contiguous forests in India, spread over 5500 sq km. Since tea and coffee plants are not palatable for elephants, the "human-elephant conflict" is largely around people getting killed in accidental encounters. About 12 people are killed every year, and a significant percentage of the residents live in constant fear.

A defining characteristic of the region is that land is highly contested, with a complicated history. There have been various waves of immigration into the region, all with differing claims to the land. The indigenous people, in five different ethnic groups, who are now a small minority, in possession of very little land. The influx of people started with colonial planters and the plantations workers in the late 1800s and early 1900s. They took the land on 99 year leases from the neighbouring Nilambur Royal family, with the aim of gradually "developing" the forested lands and bringing them under cultivation. These leases were then sold on and sub divided numerous times, though not all of the land was planted – almost half of it was left as intact forest. The leases began expiring in the 1960s, and since then ownership has been fiercely contested between the large estates and small farmers on one side and the state government and forest department on the other, with cases still pending in the Supreme Court of India. The 1920 saw the second wave of immigrants from the neighbouring state of Kerala, who took possession of these disputed lands in large numbers and began cultivating them. Then in the 1970s came the third wave of Srilankan Tamil repatriates. The forest department cleared vast tracts of forests and created a tea plantation to provide employment, though the land is still officially classified as forest. Many of them subsequently moved off the government run plantation and established their own homesteads on disputed lands. So what is officially notified as forest may well be a plantation and vice-versa. This highly complicated history of course has an impact on how people and elephants share space. The whole region is highly fragmented, with no clear correlation between where the people, forests or elephants occur, making it clear that the usual "solution" of fences and trenches to spatially separate human and elephant living space does not hold good.

But the key issue of "human-elephant conflict" remains – of people getting killed in accidental encounters, with no clear solutions in sight. Our work in the region started with better understanding the "human" dimension, but in this paper, I focus more on our recent work on better understanding the elephants.

The Elephants

The first step was to identify where elephants were on a daily basis. For this we set up a "crowd sourced elephant monitoring and early warning system (CEMEWS)" (Babu and Thekaekara 2013), where local people can send in text messages when they see elephants, and warning messages automatically get sent to subscribers within a one kilometre radius. The sightings are also plotted on a map and we go to the site and photograph and observe the elephants ourselves. While the technology back-end for the system has been in place since 2014, it took quite a while to get the forest department field staff on board. The system has actively been used since the end of 2015. Though it is perhaps too early to make significant conclusions about the elephants, we're starting to get interesting information.

We hoped to identify individual elephants and distinguish one from another. For this also we decided to go with a "crowd sourced" approach, as we believed it would be useful for forest department staff and local people to also be able to tell individual elephants apart - would it be easier to live with elephants if they were able to relate to individual elephants rather than the species as a whole? We produced a series of posters showing key physical features for the identification of different individuals, and facilitated numerous sessions

with local tea estate staff and the forest department on using these aids and identifying individual elephants.

Though it is early days yet, interesting observations have presented themselves. We've noticed there there are three different elephant "cultures" in the region, which we refer to as the "urban elephants", "weekly visitors" and "night explorers".

The "urban elephants" seem to spend all their time alongside people. The Kapikad herd is the best example of this, who spend all their time in the Cherambady Range, to the west of Gudalur. The matriarch has a big tear in her right ear, making her very easily identifiable. The herd stays relatively hidden in small patches of forests or swamps during the day, away from the heat and large crowds of people, often sleeping. They spend the nights moving about, possibly feeding, given the large quantities of vegetation needed to sustain themselves. They have been in an area of about 20 sq km in the Cherambady range for the last 8 months, and seem quite content with the grasslands on the tops on the hillocks and the swamps at the bottom, moving through the tea in-between without causing much damage. There are about 25 elephants using an area of about 25 sqkm, making their density comparable with more intact forests, with a key variant being the resident human population of about 10,000 people.

Next are the "weekly visitors". These herds are seen mostly in the O'Valley Range, to the South-East of Gudalur. They are seen for a week or so near people's houses and then they seems to move away for a few weeks, and not sighted. Even when they are seen around houses, they appear quite shy, and stay hidden in the forest under-storey as much as possible.

Finally come the "night explorers", along the boundaries of Mudumalai. They come out of the reserve and into Gudalur in the nights, crossing the "Elephant Proof Trench" (EPT), but invariably go back on their own in the morning. Sometimes they stay for a day or so, or get stuck at points where they can't cross the trench, but eventually get chased back to the forests by people. We don't get to see and photograph them much, and only get a few images in camera traps or when they do get stuck in Gudalur.

We're of course getting to know the urban elephants much better than the weekly visitors or the night explorers, since we see them a lot more. They live, sleep, eat, bathe, and even give birth with local people watching them. "Messi", for example, was born during the 2010 football world cup, near the "10 Lines" in Cherambady, and was named after the Argentinian footballer by the people watching. Ganesan/CMK1 is another well known local elephants. He is a middle aged, tuskless male, and one of the biggest elephants we have seen. He almost never gets agitated with people and attacks them; we've even seen children chasing him along a small road with sticks and stones, much like they do with cattle.

But their existence is by no means peaceful. Local people are understandably afraid of accidental encounters with the elephants, and complain to the forest department. They in turn have taken it upon themselves to chase the elephants whenever they see them. And the chasing operations feel and sound rather like a war zone. People shouting and running around everywhere, missile-like fire crackers going off all the time, smoke and small fires, and of course, elephants trumpeting. And the purpose of these chases is not clear. There is an elephant proof trench to the south of the Cherambady Range, and generally the objective is to chase them past the trench. But again, this is far from being elephant proof. The elephants quite easily go in and out, sometimes multiple times in the same day.

In January 2016 a person got killed by elephants, and in a huge operation that involved Kumkis (trained elephants from Mudumalai camp) over two days, some of the elephants were chased from around the houses into more contiguous forests about 6 km to the south. Crossing the state highway was the big challenge, since it was busy with traffic. The Ganesan was part of the group, and walked straight back the same night. The herd stayed to the south of the road for about 2 weeks (still in estates – not in the forests) and

then also returned to their regular area. In another instance we watched a chase that started early morning; the elephants walked in and out of a elephant proof trench, around a hill and back to the same point by the end of the day! So it is reasonably clear that these elephants have chosen to stay alongside people, even though they are regularly "chased back" into the forests.

Many of the traditional ideas about elephants studied in more intact forests are not true for these elephants and the landscape. That they use "corridors" through human habitation to get from one forest to another, or that they come into human habitation to eat high nutrition crops. These elephants have been in Cherambady over these last eight months, making it more habitat than corridor, and with coffee and tea as the dominant crops there is no significant crop damage. That a matriarch leads the herd all the time – young males seem to take the lead in risky situations when they move through big towns. That the males are mostly solitary or in small groups, and in a 1 to 8 ratio with females – Cherambady has as many males as females, and they seem to mingle a lot, with more than one of the males sometimes being in "musth" at the same time. And there are some well known individuals who seem relatively calm and peaceful even around large crowds of people.

In addition to these preliminary observations, there was a recent incident that gave us significant insight into elephant society.

At the end of March 2016 two people were killed on the same night by elephants, within about 100m of each other and possibly by the same elephant. The state elections were a month away, and the Government, very conscious of its public image, mobilised a large number of senior officers from the police, revenue and forest departments, to travel to the Gudalur and 'sort out' the problem. People getting killed by wild animals is a significant political issue, with local protests turning violent in the past, including riots where forest officials have got beaten up and chased into the forest, and had their vehicles burnt. The head of the district administration claimed over 600 paramilitary and police staff had been deployed to keep the peace. The Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (PCCF) decided to visit Gudalur himself, possibly the first time the region had seen an official of that ranking. It was decided that the elephants should be captured and released in a different forest far away, not just chased into the neighbouring forests as they would undoubtedly come back.

The forest department mobilised two of their most experienced Kumkis, Sujai and Wasim, to come in from a neighbouring region and lead the capture operation. These elephants are a key part of these chasing or capturing wild elephant operations. It's not just their "muscle power", there is a complex mahout-Kumki-wild elephant communication that is apparent during these operations, without which it would be impossible to manage. In a previous chasing operation I've seen Udayan – another Kumki – go up to a very agitated wild tusker and grab him by the tusk. The tusker tried to pull away, but Udayan held firm. After a few minutes the wild tusker calmed down and they were able to move him in the direction they wanted. So clearly, the personalities, skills and experience of these captive elephants are also of particular importance to these operations.

Pin-pointing which elephant was responsible for the human deaths was the key challenge. Since we had already been working on identifying the individuals in the region, we were enlisted to help. We split into teams and combed the area, focussing on places were elephants were usually seen. We found three males very quickly, less than two kilometres from where the accidents happened – "Cherambady Tusker 6 (CT6)", "Cherambady broken tusker (CBT)/Shankar" (named after the forest watcher Shankar who found the broken piece of the tusk) and "Ganesan/CMK1". CT6 and CBT were together, cooling themselves in a swamp, eventually lying down and going to sleep. Ganesan was also asleep, but in a different place. Everyone in the region knew him though, and all agreed it was unlikely he would kill people given him peaceful nature. CT6 and CBT were then assumed to be the elephants most likely for the human deaths.

The next day, various teams were formed again, and fanned out looking for the elephants. And strangely, no elephants were seen anywhere. In an area where elephants were seen everyday, it was very unusual to not find any elephants. Except Ganesan/CMK1, the large makhna. While he was usually known to sleep during the day, he kept coming to the highway and holding up traffic drawing all the forest department field staff to chasing him away. This happened three times during the day.

Later that evening, after a full day of not seeing any elephants other than Ganesan, 13 elephants were seen near the Kotamalai check-dam, to the south of the Cherambady range. My colleagues were close by, and went there to identify the individuals to see if CT6 or Shankar were there. And they excitedly called back to say that from the 13 elephants, we had only seen 2 before – all the rest were new elephants – individuals we had not seen in the last 4 months. I thought they had to be wrong, with 25 elephants already in the region it was highly unlikely that 11 more would come in. But they were sure. And after we double checked and compared all the photos with elephants we knew already in our database, we found it was true. The Cherambady elephants were nowhere to be seen, but 11 new elephants had come in.

Over the course of the night there was yet another incident with the Kumkis. They had been attacked by a wild tusker, with Bomman, an 18 year old Kumki having been wounded in the face by a tusk. The Kumkis were all tethered to various trees, and couldn't move around freely. And in the dark there was nothing much the mahouts could do without endangering their own lives. The wild tusker was finally chased away with fire-crackers and drums, but everyone was shaken. The mahouts are all from the Bettakurumba tribe, who think of elephants as "non human persons", and for them it was a bad sign. They didn't want to go ahead with the capture, and they said the Kumkis were also scared, but there was no choice. We tracked the wild tusker the next morning, and found he was a young male – possibly a teenager, and one of the new tuskers seen at the Kotamalai check-dam, not one who had been around the previous four months.

The next day again there were no elephants, except Ganesan showing himself at various points. CT6 was spotted later in the day, but was with was another young tusker elephant, which my colleague said was "maybe his cousin or brother, since they look exactly the same and it's really hard to tell the difference". Soon after that another young tusker joined them, and the three refused to split up. The capturing team kept following them around, but tranquillising the right was was a huge challenege; the shot was best fired into the thigh or rump of the elephant, but they couldn't tell the elephants apart unless they were facing the team. He was finally darted late evening, loaded into the truck and taken to the elephant camp in Mudumalai.

All of this "elephant behaviour" could be interpreted in two ways. There could of course be simple straightforward explanations about triggers from their natural environment – all the crowds of people and general heightened level of human activity scared away all the elephants except CMK1, who was perhaps too disturbed to sleep during the day. The new elephants just happened to come by on that day, and the attack on the Kumkis was a somewhat random act. The three tuskers felt threatened and stayed together.

Alternatively, the elephants knew something was happening, and were making plans and reacting in their own way. I'm not going to try and de-construct all of this and weigh one school of thought against another, but I think it's safe to say it maybe a combination of both.

Conclusion

Where am I going with all of this and how is it relevant to the conservation of elephants? I think most people in this room would all agree that elephants are indeed thinking, sentient beings, making decisions based on complex cognitive processes we don't yet understand. The tricky part is how we can incorporate this into policy/conservation practice. We put up fences, trenches, deterrents and set up early warning systems. We collar them and move them around. We make detailed cartographic plans about how the

elephants should use the space around them. And yet, the interface continues to evolve (between the complex cognitive powers of the elephant and human strategies), throwing up fresh challenges every day. Perhaps it's time to accept that elephants are going to be involved in shaping their own destiny, beyond all the conservation and conflict mitigation plans that we make. We cannot of course ask them what they think of our conservation plans, or even actually begin to think like an elephant. But we have to try.

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