

Shooting an elephant

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In a famous essay, George Orwell tells how local people in British Burma coerce a young member of the imperial police service – himself – into shooting an elephant. It is a domestic elephant, a male in musth who has broken his chains. He is causing alarm to the people and damage to property. He killed a labourer in his path. The owner is nowhere to be found and the mahout has gone far off in the wrong direction. When Orwell comes to the scene the elephant is calmly feeding and will likely do no further harm if he is left alone. But the crowd expects the policeman to shoot the elephant. Orwell learns that there is in the colonial relation a pre-written script for the situation, according to which a policeman who would rather not must shoot and kill an elephant by command of the Burmese locals over whom Britannia, in the person of the police officer, rules.

For it is the condition of his rule that he shall spend his life in trying to impress the “natives”, and so in every crisis he has got to do what the “natives” expect of him A sahib has got to act like a sahib; he has got to appear resolute, to know his own mind and do definite things. To come all that way, rifle in hand, with two thousand people marching at my heels, and then to trail feebly away, having done nothing – no, that was impossible. The crowd would laugh at me. And my whole life, every white man’s life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at. ¹

The entire absurd incident is generated by the colonial relation, in Orwell’s telling. But there is a long prehistory to this story and the script it enacts, long prior to the colonial relation whose paradoxical effect Orwell so brilliantly reveals.

In this essay I borrow the title of Orwell’s piece and put it to a different purpose, namely to survey the long duration of Indian history in order to determine *how* elephants were shot, *which* elephants could and could not be shot, *under what circumstances*. I will carry the inquiry across four periods, ancient, medieval, colonial and since independence. As I hope to show, the ancient situation in India and in Southeast Asia was governed by the place of the war elephant in the Indic model of kingship, which issued in the royal *protection* of wild elephants, not the shooting of them, and the rise of sport hunting during the colonial period constituted a sharp discontinuity with prior history. The sport hunting of elephants had such catastrophic effects that legislative measures had to be taken, although a complete prohibition was not enacted until well after independence.

In order to understand this development fully we need to examine the larger history of elephant shooting, encompassing the differential treatment of wild, domestic and war elephants, hunting for sport, for food and for ivory, and by bow and arrow as well as high-powered rifles.

This overview of elephant-shooting will show, as a bonus, how the script Orwell found himself obliged to follow was written in the first place, and what were the transformations that turned prior texts of Sanskrit and Pali literature into a gem of English literature.

1. Ancient India and Sri Lanka: protecting wild elephants, shooting enemy war elephants

Robert Krotenthaler’s survey of hunting in ancient India is a valuable resource for examining whether elephants were hunted. He draws attention to a passage from Mallinātha’s fourteenth century commentary on Kalidāsa’s *Raghuvamśa*, a work written in the Gupta period, fifth century CE.

Except when seeking victory in battle one should not kill an elephant – so says *śāstra*.²

In this passage the inviolability of wild elephants is sanctified by attributing it to an unspecified *śāstra*, while the killing of trained elephants of the enemy in battle is permitted. It elaborates on a verse of *Raghuvamśa* stating directly that the king is forbidden to kill elephants. This expresses nicely the tendency of Indian kingship to protect wild elephants. The logic of it follows from the strategic value of the war elephant and the need to have a pool of wild elephants upon which to draw in order to turn them into war elephants. Elephants are wanted because of their strength and size as the largest living land animals, which makes them terror-inducing to enemy soldiers and effective batterers of fortifications. But those very attributes make it impractical to breed them in captivity and feed them till maturity. Hence they are captured as wild adults, which the *Arthaśāstra* (2.31.9) puts at age 20, and trained. For the most part elephants have been caught wild and domesticated, one by one, through the ages – a limit case of domestication. What *śāstra* sanctifies in this case is the interest of kingship, to protect wild elephants in forests as a military store, in order to train them for war, when they will be exposed to enemy fire on the battlefield.

Shooting an elephant, then, is permitted in battle against a trained war elephant of the enemy, but forbidden for a wild elephant. Generally in the ancient texts the *hunting* of wild elephants means their *capture*, not their *killing*. Occasionally, as in a passage of the *Arthaśāstra*, a text explicitly distinguishes elephant capture (*hastibandhanam*) from hunting (*mṛgayā*).³

Instances of the killing of wild elephants in the literary record of ancient India are accordingly very few. Krottenthaler discusses two: the story of Daśaratha in the *Rāmāyaṇa* intending to kill an elephant but killing a man by mistake, and the deliberate killing of a six-tusked elephant in the *Śaddantajātaka*.

In the first, the youthful Daśaratha, hunting near a waterhole at night, shot an arrow in the direction of a sound he thought was made by an elephant. Unfortunately it was the son of a forest-dwelling sage, filling a pot with drinking water, and he was killed. Daśaratha had the reputation of being able to hit his prey with an arrow by sound alone (whence the nighttime hunting), but in this case he mistook the sound. Being impetuous (*ajitendriya*) he had gone out at night to hunt a buffalo, elephant or other wild animal (*Rām*. 2.57.15). The natural interpretation would be that hunting an elephant was not, at some early period, forbidden. Daśaratha's intent was to kill an elephant, but his sin was to have killed a human.⁴ This interpretation is reinforced by another passage of the same work, in which Sītā is wounded by the words of Rāma “as a female elephant by a poisoned arrow”⁵ when, at first, he forbids her to accompany him to his forest exile. The situation of the simile is not specified, but the natural presumption is that it is a hunting scene, not a battlefield one, in which we expect male elephants only. If it is the case that elephants could be hunted at some early period in which the *Rāmāyaṇa* took shape, however, hunting elephants to kill them must have been very uncommon as it is rarely mentioned in this or other works. And when this very story of Daśaratha is retold in the *Raghuvamśa* of Kalidāsa, the killing of elephants by kings is now directly *forbidden*, the basis of the comment of Mallinātha cited above. In the original story Daśaratha's action implies that elephant-hunting is normal, but in the re-tellings of the stories it is stated to be forbidden and that Daśaratha succumbs to it under the influence of passion (*rajas*). This refers to the mention of prince Daśaratha's lack of control over the passions (*ajitendriya*) in the *Rāmāyaṇa* version.

In Krottenthaler's second story, the *Śaddanta-jātaka*, the Bodhisattva is born as a six-tusked elephant who attracts the enmity of a queen due to a wrong she had suffered in a previous birth as a female elephant. She dispatches a hunter to exact her revenge. He kills the elephant by shooting it from beneath, hiding in an elaborately constructed covered pit in the path of its daily movements.

The shooting an elephant from a pit beneath is highly improbable, but lots of circumstantial detail is given. The method is the opposite of a pitfall trap, in which the false surface gives way so that the elephant falls into the pit. Here the surface is supported by a massive pillar resting upon a massive boulder, supporting rafters, the whole strong enough to bear the weight of an elephant and *prevent* him from falling into the pit. The intricacies of this construction are depicted in the paintings of Ajanta, Cave 10. But, although the story is widely spread in texts and visual representations there are no other examples of this method of shooting an elephant in ancient literature and art that would lead us to believe it was an actual practice and not a storyteller's invention. The construction of the pit with its strong timber framing to support the elephant in order to get the shot from below is so very laborious as to appear improbable. Moreover, it is a question whether an elephant is vulnerable to a shot into its underside. The one other example I know of comes, not from India, but the Greek text of the apocryphal book of *I Maccabees*, in which the Hebrew warrior Eleazar crept under the war elephant of the Seleucid king Antiochus, "thrust him under, and slew him: whereupon the elephant fell down upon him, and there he died" (*I Macc.* 6.46), achieving the undying fame of a hero. Of the *Mahābhārata* Hopkins says, "In attacking one crawls under and smites in", but the reference, to the Bombay edition (not in the Critical Edition, hence a later addition) refers to Bhīma dashing under an enemy elephant and striking upward (*añjalikabedha*) with his bare hands, such that he turns the elephant around quickly as on a potter's wheel, dashing out again, but without killing it (Hopkins 266 fn., *Mbh.* (Bombay ed.) 7.26.23-25). It is an image made memorable at the expense of realism. All in all, the story of the *Ṣaḍdanta-jātaka* is one of a kind, unique as an elephant with six tusks.

As to *how* to shoot an elephant, Krottenthaler notes that in both cases the hunter uses a bow with an iron arrow (*nārāca*) that is poisoned.⁶

The two stories are virtually the whole of the record of hunting wild elephants to kill them in Sanskrit literature; further examples are few indeed. Thus in the large story collection called the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, which often speaks of royal hunts and of hunters who are forest people, there are but two other examples. The first is a passing reference to a hunter who kills elephants in search of the "pearls" in their foreheads, which are considered especially rare and precious. As the hunter in question is a king of the Śavara, a forest people, this is not strong evidence for the generality of elephant-killing. The second is a minister's admonition to his king on the evils of hunting. In the course of his argument he lists many reasons not to hunt, one of them being that wild elephants and their slayers have equal risk of losing their lives. It implies the killing of wild elephants was not entirely unknown (*KSS* 4.22, 1:177; 4. 21, 1:167).

On the other hand there are two circumstances in which the killing of a *domestic* elephant is permitted without question. One of these is the exception named in the Mallinātha passage, the killing of an enemy war elephant in battle. The second is the killing of a domestic elephant gone on a rampage and endangering human life. The second is the true source of the Orwellian script.

Of the killing of enemy elephants in battle there are examples from the epics in such abundance that I need only mention a few features. Archery is at the fore; the heroes are great chariot-warriors (*mahāratha*) and bowmen. The use of the iron arrow noted by Krottenthaler (though not of poison) is confirmed by the *Mahābhārata*, in scenes of enemy elephants killed in battle. Thus Arjuna shoots the elephant of Vikarṇa, which was bearing down on him at great speed, with an arrow of iron, striking its head between the two frontal bosses (*kumbha*), the single arrow sinking to the nock and splitting the animal in two (*Mbh.* 4.60.7-9). Battle scenes of elephant-killing regularly speak of arrows of iron, though swords and other implements of battle are sometimes also involved.

Of the peace-time subduing of an elephant that has broken free of its chains there are at least two subtypes of the trope, one in which the elephant is killed by a hero, the other in which it is subdued by a holy person. I give an example of each.

A brief story in the *Kathāsaritsāgara* exemplifies the first (KSS 16.112; 2:490). The beautiful daughter of king Prasenajit in the city of Supraṭiṣṭhita is charged by an elephant that has broken its fastenings. He flings her up on his tusks, palanquin and all. A young man of striking good looks grabs a sword and dispatches the elephant, saving the princess. He is a person of low caste, a Caṇḍāla, and the two, who are powerfully attracted to one another, are in despair because the difference of their social positions interdicts their ever marrying. But there is a happy ending, as the hero is discovered not to be a Caṇḍāla after all, but a person of high station.

A famous story in the Buddhist canon exemplifies the second. Devadatta, evil cousin and enemy of the Buddha, gets the consent of king Ajātaśatru to set an elephant of the royal stables named Nālāgiri upon the holy one. The elephant, made more fierce by giving it twice the usual measure of toddy, is let free in the street of the capital city, Rājagṛha. The elephant attacks a child dropped at the feet of the Buddha by a fleeing woman, but the Buddha spoke to Nālāgiri, suffusing him with love, and stroked his forehead. “Thrilling with joy at the touch, Nālāgiri sank on his knees before the Buddha, and the Buddha taught him the Dhamma.” (DPPN s.v. Nālāgiri, citing *Vin.* 2.194 ff., *Jāt.* 5.333 and *Avadānaśataka* 1.177).

In both stories the logic attaching to the institution of the royal war elephant is presupposed. Such an elephant is a large tusker, necessarily male, who, uniquely among the animals of the army, is prized for his terror-inducing features, especially the hormonal state of combativeness called musth, or *mada* in Sanskrit. This *mada* or madness is not mental illness but the intoxication provoked by testosterone; as in the second story the elephant-keepers administer an alcoholic drink to bring it on or heighten it artificially. As Edgerton rightly says of this state, the texts understand it as an excess of joy, and a sign of good health and vigor.⁷ It is not viewed as pathological at all; quite the contrary. What makes a war elephant valuable is exactly what makes him a danger to humans. Because of this there remains some distance to be covered between these ancient prior texts and Orwell’s unhappy reminiscence, in that the elephant in question in Orwell’s essay was not royal, but a simple working elephant, and Orwell was not a hero rescuing a princess but a colonial policeman with a bad conscience.

In the literature of ancient India there are a great many stories of kings going hunting for animals other than elephants, and references to hunting elephants for capture and domestication. The abundance of such references is in contrast with the extreme rarity of references to the hunting and killing of elephants for sport or food. This pattern, and the explicit statement of Mallinātha, require us to believe that the prohibition on the killing of wild elephants had a wide currency in ancient India, at least in the north and the upper peninsula, from which the texts we have drawn upon so far have come.

Turning to South India, the Sangam Literature of the Tamil country gives a similar picture, but with some difference. Elephants are mentioned a great deal in this body of classical texts, but they are distributed in a specific way. Domesticated elephants are found in the poetry of war and kingship (*puram*), in the form of war elephants in fourfold armies of elephant, chariot, cavalry and infantry troops. They are widespread and normative, and they are the highest form of gift in poems praising the liberality of great kings. So far the description jibes with that of ancient northern India.

But when we come to wild elephants, we meet them, rather, in the poetry of love (*akam*), in only one of the five landscapes into which poems of this kind are divided. The habitat of wild elephants is in the landscape called *kuriñci*, named after a flower which grows in the mountains, among rude forest people who farm millet and collect ivory for trade. It is a commonplace of the love-poetry set in this landscape that a young man will use the pretence that he is hunting an elephant to strike up an acquaintance with a pretty young woman he happens upon – has she by any chance seen a wounded elephant pass this way?⁸ This unusual conversation starter implies that elephant-hunting is normal, and it implies as well that there was no royal protection of wild elephants in South India at that

time. But the scenario is an exotic one, at the farthest remove from the royal palace – a kind of genre painting of rustics by the poets of the royal court, whose realism on this point, therefore, is not guaranteed. In any case, as I shall now show, the *Mānasollāsa* indicates that at least in later times South Indian kings punished those who killed elephants.

Kings are forbidden to kill elephants or, according to Mallinātha's commentary, the warrior class generally. What about others? We see from the *Arthaśāstra* that kings attempted to prevent all others from killing elephants by imposing the ultimate penalty, and rewarded the scavenging of ivory from elephants dying naturally:

They should put to death anyone who kills an elephant. Anyone who brings the two tusks of an elephant that has died naturally shall receive a reward of four and a quarter *panas*. The elephant-forest wardens, assisted by elephant keepers, foot chainers, border guards, foresters, and attendants – their body odors masked by rubbing elephant urine and dung, camouflaged with branches of *bhallātakī*-tree, and moving about with five or seven female elephants acting as lures – should find out the size of the elephant herds by means of clues provided by where they sleep, their footprints and dung, and the damage they have done to river banks.⁹

Going through what the *Mānasollāsa* has to say about elephants for this paper I have discovered a distinct echo of the *Arthaśāstra* passage:

People who kill elephants are evil; the king should put them to death. He should collect the tusks of elephants who have died naturally (lit. due to fate).

He should locate an elephant herd by means of forest people who have smeared their limbs with (elephant) urine, and are hidden by branches of the *aruṣkara* tree.¹⁰

The *Mānasollāsa* of the Cālukya king Someśvara III dates to 1131 CE, a thousand years after the composition of the *Arthaśāstra*. There is no doubt that the *Arthaśāstra* passage is a prior text for the *Mānasollāsa* passage, but it would seem not directly, as there are few verbal similarities between the two, and the different names of trees with whose branches those scouting wild elephants conceal themselves. Some intermediary texts must have been involved in the transmission. We should not suppose it is a merely literary continuity, as the content of the *Mānasollāsa* gives evidence of being close to current practice. Between these two texts we also have the testimony of the *Raghuvamśa* previously discussed.

A distant echo of the principal of royal protection of wild elephants, furthermore, is found in Egypt, at the time of its Hellenistic rulers, the Ptolemies, in a Greek text of Agatharcides.

The Ptolemies had taken up the Indian institution of the war elephant, as had their rivals, the Seleucids of Syria. Cut off by the latter from the land route to India by which to acquire Indian elephants, the Ptolemies used Indian techniques of hunting, capture and training to acquire war elephants from their hinterland in the Sudan. They called the elephant-driver “the Indian”, indicating their dependence upon Indians for this function, and this usage continued in Greek and Latin texts of the period. According to Agatharcides, Ptolemy II Philadelphos ordered forest people called Elephant-eaters to cease killing wild elephants so that his people could capture and train them, trying to impose upon the forest people a regime similar to the one of which the *Arthaśāstra* speaks, except that he offered subsidies rather than penalties. He promised great rewards, but they said they would not comply if he gave them the whole kingdom of Egypt (Agatharcides 56). The offer failed, but the impulse to stop forest people killing elephants coincides with the objectives of the policy promoted by the *Arthaśāstra*. It is striking evidence of the far reach of the culture of elephant-use attaching to the Indian model of kingship.

Thus Indian kings put an end to the killing of elephants, as best they could, but captured and trained them for war. They also used elephants in royal hunts, as mounts, but for most of the period after the rise of the war elephant they did not hunt wild elephants to kill them. A magnificent representation of the use of elephants in a royal hunt comes from Persia under the Sassanians in a relief sculpture of a royal hunt on a cliff face at Taq-i Bustan (Trautmann 2015: 254, Fig. 6.4). No fewer than 22 Asian elephants with drivers and their assistants, probably imported from India as an ensemble, drive the game within a very large square area enclosed by a running wall of fabric, toward the king, who shoots with bow and arrow; and, outside the enclosure, bear away the dressed kill. It is likely that the form of the royal hunt was disseminated from Persia to India in ancient times; but the Persian use of elephants to drive the game is certainly an Indian practice which the Persians adopted, giving magnificence to the scene which was only heightened by its immense cost.



Figure 1: Detail of the left part of the rock relief at Taq-e Bustan, "Taq-e Bustan V", carved by Sasanian king Khosrow II (591–628 CE) showing domestic elephants in a boar hunting scene. Province of Kermanshah, Iran. Photo :Alieh Saadatpour

The pattern of elephant-related practices enforced by Indian kings was also established in Ceylon. Nicholas' survey of the pattern in Ceylon from ancient times hits all the same notes:

Wild elephants in the Sinhalese kingdom were always the king's property and under royal protection: they could not be captured, killed or maimed, under pain of death, without the king's permission. Depredations on crops and cultivation had to be prevented by stout fencing, aided by organized and effective watching, not by capture or slaughter. Elephants were captured and tamed on behalf of the king for religious and ceremonial purposes, for use in war, for employment as working animals, and for the export trade to India. The elephant hunt (*et-vage*), trading in elephants (*et-velandama*), and riding on elephants (*et-nagema*) were all royal

prerogatives jealously guarded by the king. *The hunting of elephants was totally unknown* [emphasis supplied]. (Nicholas 1954: 105)

On hunting I take it to mean that hunting elephants for live capture was a royal prerogative while hunting elephants to kill them, by kings or anyone else, was unknown.

As I have shown elsewhere (Trautmann 2015, chh. 7-8), the Indian model spread to Southeast Asia, among the Indianising kingdoms there, and among minority ethnicities of Yunnan, adjoining Southeast Asia, but not into China proper. The success with which the Indian model protected wild elephants can be shown by comparing it with China, where wild elephants once were abundant but have long since retreated before the southward spread of civilisation (Elvin 2004; Trautmann 2015: 4-10). Chinese encountered the war elephant among “bandits” in Yunnan but refused to adopt it as an institution, and their kings killed elephants for ivory, for food, and to clear forests for agriculture. There are little more than 300 elephants in China today, now under state protection, and found only in Yunnan. By contrast India has the largest population of Asian elephants, some 30,000, after three millennia of capturing elephants for war and other purposes, and significant populations are still found in some regions of Southeast Asia.

2. Medieval India: Turkish and Mughals perpetuate the ancient pattern

The Turks established the Delhi Sultanate in 1206, and the Mughals established an Indian empire in 1526. Both descended from nomadic pastoralists of Central Asia, whose style of warfare depended upon light cavalry armed with bows and tactics of repeated charges and retreats at speed, firing rapidly, with many remounts to continue the process. But that lay in their distant past, before entering India. Within India the armies of the Turks and Mughals continued to rely upon cavalry, but adopted the features of large Indian armies of the time, which included *heavy* cavalry instead of Central Asian-style light cavalry, plus war elephants and vast numbers of infantry drawn from the farming villages.

As Simon Digby (1971) has argued, the Turks had no evident technological advantage over the Indian rajas, and the success of the Delhi Sultanate rested, instead, upon its ability to control the supply of military horses and elephants, and to deny them to their enemies. Within the Sultanate, control of the royal elephant establishment (*pil-khana*) and stables (*pa'egah*) constituted control of the state in succession disputes, especially in the twilight century that followed the invasion of Timur and the sack of Delhi (1398), as Digby shows in great detail. Both Turks and Mughals accumulated large numbers of military elephants by hunting and capturing, purchase and especially tribute, which had the added benefit of reducing the number of elephants in the hands of potential enemies.

Abul Fazl, in his great work on the government of the Mughal emperor Akbar, the *Ain-i Akbari*, discusses hunting at length (*Ain* 2.27). He first writes of tiger hunting, and then elephant hunts. While in the first the tiger is killed, the second lists methods of capture of elephants, not the killing of them. The four methods of elephant capture, driving into a stockade, using a female elephant to lure a male, pitfall, and luring elephants via a single gate into an area surrounded by a ditch, are explicitly traditional ones; a fifth, combining the methods of the drive and the lure, is said to have been invented by Akbar. The account makes it clear that Hindu works of “elephant science” (*gajaśāstra*) were known to the Mughals, and the management and care of elephants are continuations of pre-Mughal and for that matter pre-Turkish practices.

Akbar had a strong interest in elephants, and Abul Fazl shows it in the extensive treatment of elephants in his work. According to Abul Fazl, the emperor held 101 elephants in the royal reserve for his use only. Akbar himself was the mahout of these elephants, which is remarkable; although the mahout had a position of strategic importance in war, and required considerable skill and courage, the position was both lowly-paid and dangerous. Not only was Akbar the mahout for the elephants of the royal



Figure 2: Akbar crossing the Ganges. *Akbarnama*, 1567

reserve, but he was fearless in mounting an elephant in musth and bringing it under control. On one memorable occasion he was the mahout during an elephant fight that went badly awry. A painting in the splendid collection of paintings illustrating the *Akbarnama*, possibly made for Akbar himself, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, shows the dramatic issue of the fight in which the victorious elephant, with Akbar on his neck, chases the losing elephant across a bridge of boats, which is nearly wrecked by the weight of the elephants (Trautmann 2015: 176-177, Fig. 4.2, Victoria and Albert Museum website, Akbarnama album). The bare royal feet are thrust into the band of rope around his elephant's neck to keep from being thrown by the violence of the action, sacrificing imperial decorum while displaying imperial fearlessness. The story had great popular appeal, and was retold for generations after. The Venetian traveller Niccolao Manucci, in his account of the Mughal empire written in the time of last of the great Mughal emperors, Aurangzeb, retells the story. He adds the detail, underscoring the danger and Akbar's fearlessness, that when drivers mount their elephants for elephant-fights, their wives break their bangles and take off their jewels as a sign that they are about to become widows (Manucci p. 133).

After Akbar there are several paintings for courts of Mughal times showing kings or nobles in the role of the mahout, possibly inspired by Akbar's example. The collection of Mughal-period paintings by Howard Hodgkin, who sought out paintings of elephants, is especially valuable for making this practice visible. A stunning example of king as mahout is that of Sultan Muhammad Adil Shah and Ikhlas Khan riding an elephant, from Bijapur, c. 1645 by Haidar Ali and Ibrahim Khan (Topsfield 2010: 94-95, no. 36). The king, with gold nimbus, holds an *aṅkuṣa* as he sits on the neck, his (probably bare) feet hidden behind the ear of the elephant, painted in profile. Behind, in the position of the mahout's assistant (called *bhoi* in Abul Fazl's work) is his minister Ikhlas Khan, waving a white cloth to shoo flies away from his master. Andrew Topsfield considers this painting to have been modeled upon a Mughal painting of the era of Shah Jahan, c. 1640, whose rider, "wearing a fine transparent muslin robe", holding an *aṅkuṣa*, is the mahout (2010: 62-63, no. 20). A later Mughal portrait of the elephant Ganesh Gaj, dating to c. 1660-70, has a rider mahout who is "evidently a Mughal prince, perhaps one of the sons of Aurangzeb" (2010: 72-73, no. 25). Nine of the paintings show royal or noble riders taking the place of the mahout, in portraits, hunting scenes and elephant fights, from Mughal period courts of Bijapur, Bundi, Kota and Sawar (the foregoing, plus nos. 40, 78, 79, 80, 91 and 107).¹¹

Subsequent Mughal emperors did not have the personal enthusiasm for elephants that Akbar had which, as we have seen, was remembered as exceptional. But they all used elephants in their armies, as had Indian kings since the late Vedic period. A new development of the period is the heavy armor borne by both cavalry and elephant forces on the battlefield. This is vividly shown in the *Akbarnama* paintings in the Victorian and Albert Museum.¹² Clearly the offensive weaponry had improved over the ages, most notably by the rise of gunpowder warfare. As shooting an elephant had become more effective, defensive measures had to keep pace. Here again we see not so much a change of pattern as an intensification of earlier tendencies.

In sum, Turks and Mughals adopted and perpetuated the practices and the technical knowledge that sustained the institution of the war elephant. The testimony of Abul Fazl is that Akbar hunted elephants to capture and train them, not to kill them. I have not found direct evidence that the killing of elephants by others was prohibited by the Mughal king, as it was in the *Arthaśāstra*, in Mallinātha, and in the *Mānasollāsa*. But there is evidence of an indirect kind, drawn from the geographical distribution of wild elephants as shown in Irfan Habib's atlas of the Mughal empire, for the period 1500-1800. It shows little shrinkage of habitat from the eight elephant forests of the *Arthaśāstra* over a millennium before; while the great shrinkage of today evidently began during the British period. The great loss of habitat and crash of elephant numbers that we see today commenced after 1800 (Trautmann 2015: 12-21).

3. The colonial period: sport hunting and conservation of elephants

Thus when the British East India Company was becoming a land power in late Mughal India, the prevailing culture of hunting precluded killing the wild elephant.

It is something of a question how the sport hunting of elephants in India came about, as Britons had no prior experience of killing elephants. An immensely valuable document in this connection is the book, *Oriental field sports*, written by Captain Thomas Williamson, serving the East India Company in Bengal for “upwards of twenty years”; it was published in London in an edition lavishly illustrated with aquatints made from his designs, in 1807-08, and has become a collector’s item. It is a benchmark for its time.

The East India Company had become a ruling power in Bengal, with Calcutta as its capital, in the eighteenth century. It was a region where elephants were both plentiful and necessary for many human ends. In the early days of Company Rule in India the British fell in with the Indian pattern of capture and training, but not the killing, of elephants. How is it they abandoned this pattern and took up the hunting of wild elephants for sport?

Oriental field sports has a great deal to say about elephants. The East India Company acquired a large elephant establishment for the military, at Rs. 700 a head. Army officers each had an allowance to maintain an elephant for their baggage. There were many elephant dealers, most of them Indian, some of them European, all of them with Indian staff to maintain their stock. Europeans in this way acquired the elements of Indian knowledge of the capture, training, and feeding of elephants and the treatment of their ills. Purchasing an elephant was like purchasing a horse – one had to know the good and bad points, and one learned them the hard way, by being taken advantage of by dealers. Moreover it was necessary for European officers to understand the points of an elephant from the Indian point of view or one would end up with an elephant that could not be resold when one’s term of service in India came to an end. A tail might have been damaged by a fight or during capture; no Indian would buy such an elephant and a European owner would be out of luck when he needed to sell.

Elephants appear throughout the book. They appear right from the start, the premise being that there are no inns in India suitable for Europeans, so the exposition commences with a discussion of the large, elaborate tents which are carried by pack elephants on journeys. It continues with the use of elephants for what was already the favorite sport of the British in India, hog hunting or, as it was later called, pigsticking, in which elephants figure as part of the entourage and perhaps at the end of a line of hunters. The book starts with several chapters on hog hunting and the first volume concludes with several chapters on the hunting of tigers, which abounded in the Bengal of that day. Williamson valued tiger-hunting even higher. Elephants were used as perches from which to hunt. In between the hogs and the tigers there are several chapters on elephant capture, which render in considerable detail the traditional methods of capture: keddah or driving into a very large stockade; luring a solitary male with one or two females (*koonkies*); the noose or lasso (called *mela shikar* in later works); and the pitfall, which the author considers objectionable because of the bodily harm the elephant may suffer.

Shooting an elephant, however, appears only once. In the course of capture of a solitary male the captive will sometimes work free of his bonds and pursue the female decoy, sometimes for miles. Williamson mentions one such having been shot, “whereby the party were saved from the most imminent danger”. This incident sets the author off on a most interesting comment on elephant-shooting in Africa (Williamson 1807: 1:141):

Vaillant tells us, in his *Travels in Africa*, that he was in the habit of shooting wild elephants! I can easily conceive it to be possible; and am inclined to acknowledge his manner of effecting his measure to be very *plausible*. However, I must confess that my opinion, as to the agility and vigour of elephants, would cause me to doubt whether the facts which Monsieur Vaillant performed in Africa could be practiced in

India. With regard to hiding behind trees, banks, &c. I am well convinced a Bengal elephant would soon dislodge one confiding in so weak a station; and without disparagement to Mr. Vaillant's veracity, I should think I might with great safety venture a wager, both that no native of Bengal, nor any European resident there, would undertake such a piece of rashness as to go out shooting wild elephants; and that, in the event of any one possessing such temerity, the sportsman would come off second best!

Thus we learn from Williamson that at this time in India an elephant would be shot only in extremis, to save human life; that there was no sport hunting of elephants in India, either by Indians or Europeans, the very idea of which he considered outlandish; that Vaillant's shooting of elephants in Africa was without precedent; and that no one in India would shoot the (more formidable) elephants of that country while on foot.

The work referred to was that of the French naturalist François Le Vaillant, *Travels from the Cape of Good-Hope into the interior parts of Africa*, translated by Elizabeth Helm and published in London in 1790. This remarkable man grew up in Dutch Guinea on the northern coast of South America, collecting birds with gun and blow-pipe, and subsequently undertook a major collecting expedition in Dutch South Africa with Hottentot guides. His shooting of elephants provisioned his camp. He pronounced the part of the trunk his crew prepared for him delicious, and of the feet, slow-baked in an earth oven, he said, "Never can our modern epicures have such a dainty at our tables". But he reserved the head for science, and dissected it.

Though Vaillant's overall purpose was science and not sport, I infer that his example in Africa became a precedent for the eventual rise of sport hunting of elephants by Europeans in India, which broke with the Indian model that had prevailed, at a point not long after the publication of *Oriental field sports*.

Once established, the appeal of elephant hunting for sport lay in the bigness of the elephant and the danger of being charged and trampled in the course of a hunt that of necessity took place on foot. Sir Samuel Baker puts it thus:

The wild elephant's attack is one of the noblest sights of the chase. The cocked ears and broad forehead present an immense frontage; the head is held high, with the trunk curled between the tusks to be uncoiled at the moment of attack; the massive forelegs come down with the force and regularity of ponderous machinery; the whole figure is rapidly foreshortened, and appears to double in size with each advancing stride. (quoted in Elliott 1973: 47)

The difficulty of the shot also played a part. The only viable shot was to the brain, encased in a large and complex skull; a shot from the side, between the eye and the ear, was the best; head on, the shot was made more difficult by the degree to which the head was raised and the greater distance the projectile had to travel through tissue. Even with the improved firearms of the nineteenth century it was no easy thing. Kinloch, a fine shot, was nevertheless unlucky when it came to elephants and, it should be added, the elephants were unlucky when it came to Kinloch. His hunting memoir records his failures in detail. In 1863 he shot four elephants six times without killing them; in 1865 he and his party landed 17 shots in 6 elephants, only one of which was killed, and he was disgusted to find it was a tuskless male, which is to say, it lacked the trophy sport hunters sought. Other elephant-hunters were more lucky, and killed great numbers.

Sport hunting, however, was only part of the equation. The pattern of land use in India was of villages juxtaposed to pasture and forest for grazing and firewood. A constant problem was the exposure of farmers' fields to the depredations of animals such as the wild hog and elephant, and of their flocks and herds to tigers and leopards. From Williamson's account of the Indian hunter (*shikari*) we can infer that he played an essential role in agriculture, giving relief from wild animals. Come to kill a tiger, the

hunter was made welcome. He could expect the villagers to serve as beaters and, after the shoot, to provide a feast and take up a collection for him by way of thanks. The hunter could also sell the pelt, teeth and claws, even the tongue and liver, thought to have medicinal value for pregnant women. In addition, government paid a bounty of five rupees (Williamson 209-222).

Government bounties figured into the rural economy in the ongoing warfare between farmers and wild animals that were considered pests. With the human population growing rapidly under the colonial peace, we may expect that farming village grew and encroached further upon the forests. Even after the general disarming of the Indian population following the failed revolt against the British in 1857, villagers could seek a license for firearms to defend themselves against wild animals destroying their crops and cattle. The growth of estates for the raising of tea and coffee, in the northeast and south of India, and in Ceylon, took place in forested, highland habitat of elephants. For many reasons the vectors of human population growth increased conflict with large wild animals that liked to feed upon farmers' crops or domestic animals. In Madras, notably, the government offered a bounty of Rs. 70 for the killing of an elephant.

Then Madras reversed course, and put elephants under protection in 1871 by executive order, following with an act in 1872 "to prevent indiscriminate destruction of elephants". Mysore soon followed Madras. An Elephant Preservation Act for British India as a whole was adopted in 1879, so that partial protection was extended to the rest of India and, eventually, Burma.

More than 'preservation', the 1879 Act was meant to establish government monopoly of this important and strategically vital natural resource. This changed approach had led earlier to the setting up of Reserve Forests in India in the 1860s. In Sri Lanka the first attempt at curbing wanton destruction of elephants and buffalo came in 1891. (Lahiri-Choudhury 1999: xxiv-xxv)

The regulation of elephant-shooting preceded the enactment of game laws to regulate the hunting of other species, so that the unregulated hunting of elephants for sport had a relatively short time-frame. Nevertheless, the damage inflicted upon the population of wild elephants was large and trophy hunting of elephants continued well into the twentieth century, well after independence. Hunters in Assam could readily get a wild elephant declared rogue and acquire a license to shoot it (Paul Keil, pers. comm.). Sport hunting of elephants was fully ended as late as 1972 (Menon, Sukumar and Kumar 1997: 15).

A similar unstable mixture of sport hunting, bounties for the protection of farming and conservation measures was created in colonial Ceylon. The abundance of elephants in Ceylon, and its elephant-using kings with their royal monopoly, made for a thriving export trade, and the Portuguese and Dutch in succession had established elephant departments, using Sinhalese practices, to continue this trade under their control. But the British brought it to an end in nineteenth century, and "the elephant population which had withstood centuries of capturing without diminution, showed very clear signs of depletion after the new pastime of shooting elephants for sport began to be indulged in by the British." (Nicholas 1954: 110). Tennant (1867: 77-78; cited in Nicholas, loc. cit.) gives the grim particulars:

One officer, Major Rogers, killed upwards of 1,400; another, Captain Gallwey, has the credit of slaying more than half that number; Major Skinner, the Commissioner of Roads, almost as many, and less persevering aspirants follow at humbler distances. But notwithstanding this prodigious destruction, a reward of a few shillings per head offered by the Government for taking elephants has claimed for 3,500 destroyed in part of the northern province alone, in less than three years prior to 1848: and between 1851 and 1856, a similar reward was paid for 2,000 in the southern province, between Galle and Hambantota.

Neither the protection of crops by farmers and/or Indian hunters, nor the shooting of elephants for sport, however, is the source of the role into which Orwell was reluctantly thrust by the townspeople. It was the killing of the domesticated elephant that had killed humans. In the ancient tales, as we have seen, elephants gone amok and threatening death were killed by heroes or tamed by saints. Under British rule they were killed by the police, or by district collectors and other civil authorities in rural India under British rule, whose regular duties obliged them to travel through their districts, sleeping under canvas for months at a time during the dry season, to hear petitions, adjudicate disputes and render justice. One notorious example was the “mad elephant of Mandla” in what is now Madhya Pradesh by Col. A. Bloomfield in early November of 1871.

This elephant killed numbers of humans on several occasions in a gruesome fashion that did not spare women and children and included dismembering. Bloomfield attributed this to musth, since police reports of such violence in February was followed by months of no such reports, until the behavior recurred in November. As I have previously noted, the ancients regarded musth not as a pathology but as a sign of health, and a feature positively desirable in a war elephant. But in the colonial context the war elephant in the fullness of its kind no longer existed, and in the conceptions of Europeans musth tended to be collapsed with other, darker forms of madness, including rage against human tormentors, and the depression of being closely confined, as, for example, in the machines likened to “melancholy, mad elephants” in Dickens’ *Hard times* (Ketabgian 2003). This construction of the elephant’s mind in English literature is very unlike those we find in the literature of ancient India. But it is worth considering that the mad elephant of Mandla was not wild but one that had escaped from the elephant establishment of a local prince. More to the point, he was now living in a habitat in which there were no longer any other wild elephants, and so was utterly without elephant sociability. It is pretty certain that musth did not by itself set off his several very violent attacks upon humans.

The details of how Col. Bloomfield shot the elephant need not detain us. The point to observe is that the literary trope of the defense of the defenseless against a maddened elephant, by a hero or a holy man, has been transformed, under conditions of colonial rule, into a responsibility of foreign rulers. The transformation has to do with loss of the positive valuation of musth following the end of the era of the war elephant, and the collapsing together of several meanings of elephant “madness” in the minds of the colonial rulers. The disarming of the Indian populace after the revolt of 1857 caused the obligation to fall mainly upon colonial officials, such as the willing Col. Bloomfield, and the reluctant Orwell.

4. Since independence: crop protection, poaching and eco-tourism

The history of elephant-human interactions in India since independence is well examined by Mahesh Rangarajan, Vivek Menon, Raman Sukumar, Ashok Kumar and others, and I will not repeat what they have said (Rangarajan 2001; Menon, Sukumar and Kumar 1997; Menon and Kumar 1998). But the literature for this period has a clearer record than any other of the spectrum of means by which elephants are shot and killed, some of which in their origins stretch back to the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. To complete the overview it is essential to incorporate these findings.

Under the colonial peace the Indian population grew rapidly; rural settlements pressed back the remaining forest and pressed harder upon the shrinking population of elephants. A rise in elephant-human interactions caused a rise in the incidence of deaths on both sides. This was exacerbated by a rise in poaching elephants for their ivory, mostly for the East Asian trade.

Following independence the colonial disarming of the people was reversed, and a new abundance of lethal means, some manufactured and some home-made, became available

for farmers to protect themselves and their crops against wild elephants, and poachers to supply an illicit trade in ivory, for an international market that has become voracious. For the most part the farmers and poachers are only able to afford the least expensive means, a condition which gives the post independence arsenal a character at once democratic and atavistic. The first resort for crop protection is often fireworks. Fireworks of a sort had been the regular means used in the elephant paintings of the Hodgkin Collection for separating fighting elephants, and other problems of control, by attendants holding *charkhis* or Catherine-wheels, small paired rockets set at right angles on a circular, spinning carriage on the end of a staff or spear (Topsfield 2010, nos. 23, 40, 79, 80, 81). The firecrackers and small rockets used by farmers to scare off crop-damaging wild elephants today, however, lose their effectiveness on repeated use. Lethal means are the next step in the escalating struggle. A report on ivory poaching in India by Vivek Menon, Raman Sukumar and Ashok Kumar (1997) gives an overview of these means used by poachers, and farmers as well. The range is astonishing.

They begin with arrows, including poisoned arrows (although not iron ones), which take us right back to the Indian epics. As in ancient times, the arrowheads are smeared with a natural poison made from seeds of certain plants (*Aesculus punduana*, *Abrus spp.*). The arrows are shot with bows, and also in the Buxa Tiger Reserve in West Bengal, with blowpipes of bamboo. Arrows were shot into the soft parts of the elephant, especially near the rectum, and animals shot died within a couple of hours. Bows are reported in use in parts of Odisha, arrows being made locally and sold for as little as Rs. 40. In one instance an arrow was found to have penetrated the skull of an elephant, and it was inferred that it was fired from a muzzle loader; but others believe that arrows shot from bows gain great power of penetration by having the arrowheads heated red hot before firing. Poisoned arrows, poisoned spears and poisoned bullets, as well as tranquillising darts, are thought to be used. Heavy bore rifles and ammunition are too expensive for most poaching gangs, which mostly employ muzzle-loaders, some of them home-made from galvanised pipe or the steering rods of jeeps. Such home-made rifles are liable to burst on firing and so are sometimes wound with copper wire to strengthen them. In one case (Wynad) the barrel of GI pipe was hidden in the forest and the poacher had only a simple, innocuous-looking home-made trigger on his person when setting out for his nefarious work. One such “rifle” was too long – over 6 feet – to be fired from the shoulder and was fired instead jammed between the stumps of trees or clefts in a rock face. Projectiles are rough balls of lead or iron, or iron rods cut into 6 inch bits, propelled by black powder, which is easily made. Light-bore cartridges for small game (12 bore) may be refilled for use against elephants. Other methods of killing elephants include poisoning of salt licks, electrocution traps rigged from high-tension lines, poisoned nails or vegetation and pitfalls. (1997:20-24).

The new nation-state legalised firearms and continued, for a time, the regime of commercial big-game hunting operations as a valuable source of foreign exchange. But by increments it has changed course and taken measures to protect elephants, to curtail and then end completely the sport hunting of elephants, and contain the effects of violent encounters with farmers. It tries to police the illegal killing of elephants by ivory poachers. Responding to the global animal welfare movement, the use of elephants in timber work, which had grown greatly under colonial rule and the international market for tropical hardwoods it assisted into being, has been brought to an end. The legal sport shooting of elephants now takes place with cameras, under conditions of eco-tourism, at what had been the hunting lodges of the colonial period. It is the culmination of a gradual transition from hunter to naturalist (Rangarajan 2001: ch. 7, “From gun to camera”).

5. Conclusion: shooting and protecting elephants

The historical moment of Orwell’s splendid essay followed the collapse and reconfiguration of the old regime of kings and war elephants. The war elephant was invented in ancient India in the late Vedic period, and the armies it served in fuelled a

period of “warring states” leading to the first unification of India under the Mauryans, who monopolised the ownership of elephants, horses and arms. The pattern spread to South India, and to Southeast Asia, including Burma, where Indianising kingdoms took up the war elephant and the Indian model of kingship. But the British extinguished the Burmese kingdom, and with it the royal protection of wild elephants. Ever more potent arms had already put an end to the war elephant on the field of battle, and elephants now had hauling functions in the army and in the timber industry served by government and international businesses such as the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation. Domestic elephants, once the prerogative of kings, became private property, and a vigorous market in elephants opened up for individual buyers. Elephant-rustling became its equally vigorous darker self (Evans 1910). The owner of the elephant Orwell shot was furious, “but he was only an Indian and could do nothing”. The Burmese situation had Indians in it, mostly from South India, both the labourer who was killed, described as a Dravidian coolie, and the owner, whom I imagine as a South Indian Chettiayar, a small-scale capitalist letting out his elephant to small-scale timber operations. Orwell was “the white man with his gun, standing in front of the unarmed native crowd,” unarmed except for the *dahs* with which they reduced the elephant Orwell shot almost to the bones by the afternoon.

The colonial situation which gave Orwell’s story its bitter truth has passed. But incidents in which elephants, domestic or wild, are a danger to humans and have to be shot by the agents of the state have not ended. According to a report in India, the annual killing of elephants by humans and by accidents is on the order of 100, and of humans by elephants on the order of 400 (ETF Report 2010). Virtually every day of the year TV and newspapers may carry a story in which an elephant is killed or a human is killed by an elephant. This is partly a function of the very great growth of the human population since 1800, when world numbers of humans have grown from one billion to seven billion, and human encroachment upon the forest. And partly it is a function, paradoxically, of the success of the nation-state in protecting wild elephants, and the very modest recent improvement in their population numbers, in India. Under such terms human-elephant conflict is bound to rise. Death coming out of conflict with humans is now an everyday story in Indian news media, and, I imagine, in the news media of Myanmar and other countries of Southeast Asia. It has a different valence, though, from Orwell’s time. It is now a story of the very great difficulty of the nation-state, trying to protect elephants from local extinction while protecting its people from the elephants.

NOTES

1. *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays*, Secker and Warburg, London, 1950.
2. Krottenthaler 1996; Mallinātha on Raghuvamśa 9.74: lakṣmīkāmo yuddhād anyatra karivadham na kuryāt iti śāstram.
3. *Arth.* 13.2.39-41; Krottenthaler 49; on prehistoric hunting of elephants see Trautmann 2015: 28-31.
4. Rāmāyaṇa 2.55.
5. Rāmāyaṇa 2.27.22ab: sā viddhā bahubhir vākyair digdhair iva gajāṅganā.
6. Jātaka 514; Krottenthaler 113-114.
7. *Mātaṅgalīlā*, introduction, p. 32; see 29-38, and text ch. 9.
8. Trautmann 2015: 202-207.
9. Cf. Arthaśāstra. 2.2.8-10: hastighātihaḥ hanyuḥ / dantayugaṃ svayaṃmṛtasyāharataḥ sapādacatuṣpaṇo labhaḥ / nāgavanapālā

hastipakapādapāśikasaimikavanacarapakārikarmikasakhā
hastimūtrapurīṣacchannagandhā bhallātakīśākhāpracchannāḥ pañcabhiḥ saptabhir
vā hastibhandakībhiḥ saha carantaḥ śayyāsthānapadyāleṇḍakūlaghātodeśena
hastikulaparyagram vidyuh /

10. *Mānasollāsa* 2.3.180-181:

ghnanti ye kariṇaḥ pāpā ghātayet tān mahīpatiḥ /
daivān mr̥teṣu nāgeṣu teṣāṃ dantān samāharet //
kariṇo mūtraśakṛtām liptāṅgair aṭavīcaraiḥ /
arūṣkaradalacchannair jāñyād ibhayūthakam //

11. Several of these paintings can also be found in an earlier publication of the Hodgson Collection: Topsfield and Beach 1991.

12. The Victoria and Albert Museum has kindly made available images of all the Akbarnama paintings on its website. A notable example is reproduced in Trautmann 2015, Fig. 4.3, facing page 177.

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