

CHARGE OF THE HEAVY BRIGADE



For centuries, Indians have revered the elephant as a god. But, now that jungle clearances have disrupted its natural migrations, man and beast are turning into bitter enemies. *Sally Beck* reports on a new crisis facing wildlife in Bengal

In West Bengal, in the shadow of the Himalayas, a bloody battle is being waged. Bengal is a tea-producing area. Vast tracts of jungle have been cleared to create hundreds of acres of carefully protected tea gardens. The fragile bushes are shaded from the sun by specially planted trees. During the day, the tea gardens are tended by women in brightly coloured saris. At night, they become a battleground between the elephants and the tea planters.

The hungry elephant strips the tea trees of their succulent branches, and, once it has finished in the gardens, heads for the labourers' houses. It is looking for corn, or *padli*, or its absolute favourite, *hadia* (the workers' home-brewed rice beer). However gentle in its search for food, a four-ton creature will inevitably cause considerable damage. One swing of its trunk smashes a hole in a wall, three will demolish it. The labourers, frightened and frustrated, fight back, with fatal consequences.

Ravinder Nagal, manager of the Baradighi Tea Estate near Mal Bazar in West Bengal, recounts a recent incident. Two men, bored with having to patch their already frail huts, prepared a carpet of sharpened metal spikes, which they planted in front of the huts. It worked: the elephant approached, painfully ripped its huge feet, and limped away, defeated. A few days later, its wounds healing,



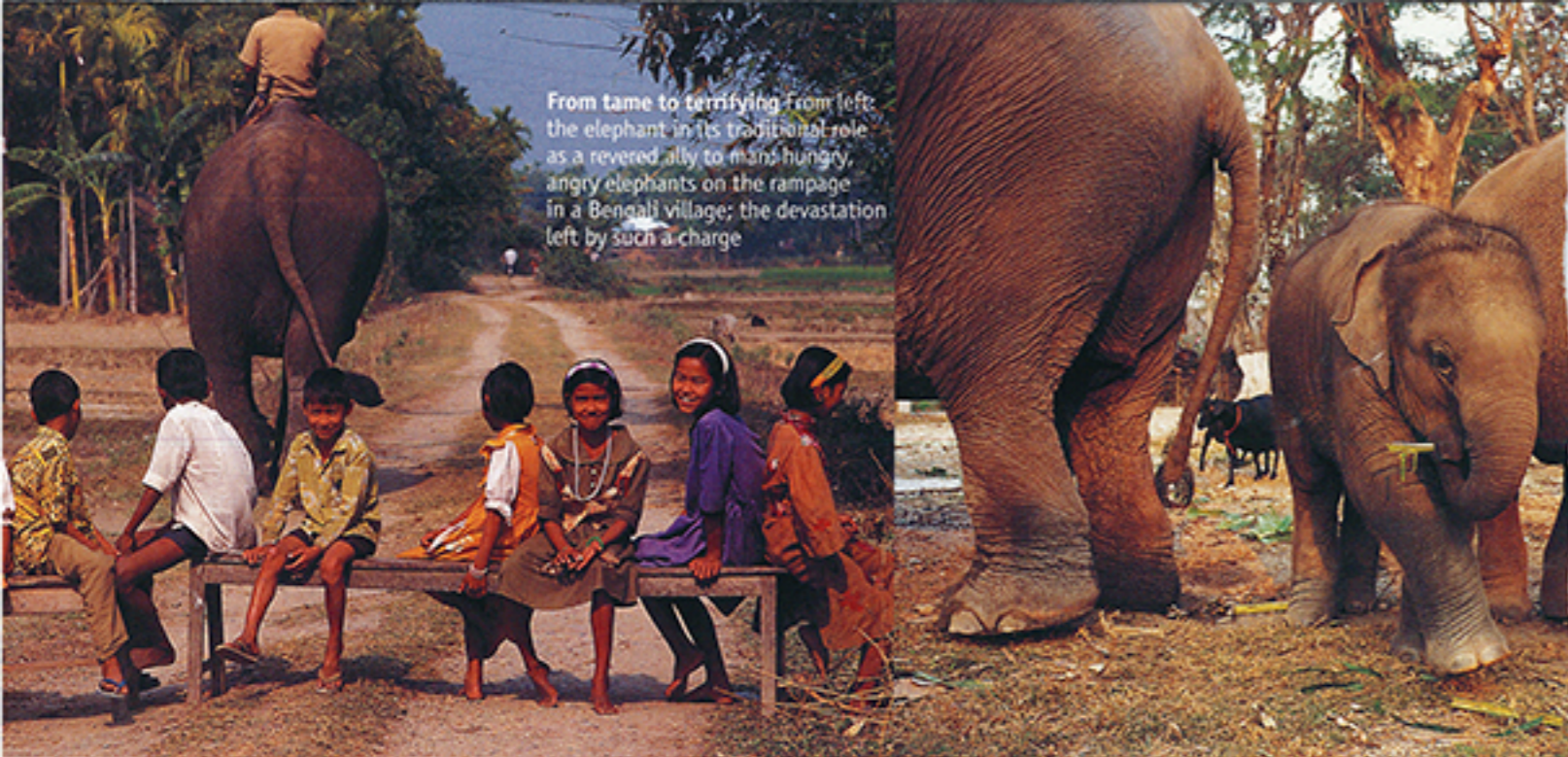
Struggle for survival With much of their natural habitat being cleared to make way for tea gardens (above), normally gentle Bengali elephants are being forced into bloody conflict with man in their search for food

it returned, and, having memorised the men's scent with its ultra-sensitive trunk, sniffed out their huts. It hauled out the screaming men, gored them with its tusks, then stamped them to death.

Similar stories are being heard around India, a symptom of one of the most serious wildlife crises for decades. The numbers of Asian elephants have dwindled to between 35,000 and 50,000, compared with an estimated 600,000 African elephants, and it faces extinction if a solution to its problems is not found.

Mark Shand, conservationist and award-winning author of *Travels on My Elephant* and *Queen of the Elephants*, has visited Bengal six times. He has heard all the stories, but registers renewed despair each time a new one is told. 'Imagine a copse in the middle of the English countryside,' he says, searching for an analogy to explain what is happening to the elephants. 'Then imagine it's home to a few starving pheasants and the odd fox. Then imagine that copse is full of starving elephants. You cut down the copse; they have no home, no food. They're like a bunch of hooligans when they come out.'

In the past year, the Bengalis have noticed that the elephants'



From tame to terrifying: from left, the elephant in its traditional role as a revered ally to man; hungry, angry elephants on the rampage in a Bengali village; the devastation left by such a charge



'We are trying to save all the animals, but we are taking

mood is changing. It seems the elephants are slowly being driven mad, becoming the animal kingdom's equivalent of displaced Aborigines or Eskimos, who despaired at the destruction of their cultures. 'You can see these changes quite clearly,' says Ravinder, the picture of colonialism with his strong, clean-shaven face, brilliant hair, and pinstripe shorts. 'Once, you would never have found herds disbanding, but now it's not unusual for a migratory herd to move through here and leave two or three elephants behind. Elephants are also matriarchal animals; it's unheard of for them to abandon their sick or their young, but now I'm beginning to hear stories of this happening, too.'

On a visit to an elephant orphanage on the borders of Bhutan, we hear a story that demonstrates the strength of the elephant's sense of family. The ramshackle animal shelter on the outskirts of Jaldhapa National Park is a sanctuary for abandoned baby elephants and the 'illegitimate' calves of domestic cows and wild bull elephants. Here lives one happy, healthy, two-year-old elephant, who affectionately winds her trunk around my waist as I hear her tale. Six months ago, she nearly drowned when she fell into the rapids of the nearby Torsa river. Her mother waded in, frantically trying to save her. Two other elephants joined the distraught cow, but all three drowned in their rescue attempt. The orphaned baby was later washed up alive further downstream. What is driving an animal with such a sense of loyalty to start displaying uncharacteristic behaviour?

The elephant is a long-ranging migratory animal that needs a wide variety of food. For 4,000 years, herds have travelled through dense jungle to find sustenance, but, in the past fifteen years, India's exploding human population (920 million in 1996, increasing annually by 20 million) has led to the steady erosion of its jungle habitat, limiting its long-distance quest for food.

'It's getting worse,' says Ravinder, who is seated in the large garden of his bungalow on the tea estate. Two feet away, we can clearly see the huge footprints of a stray elephant who raided his vegetable patch. 'We are trying to save all the animals, but we are taking away their habitat. Where can they go? Where can we go? There is no bitterness in his statement, just fatherly concern.'

In India, elephants are revered and worshipped. One of the central gods of Hinduism is the elephant god Ganesh, 'god of

protection and remover of obstacles'. 'Elephants have always been part of Indian tradition,' explains photographer and researcher Aditya Patankar, who accompanied Mark Shand on his journeys. 'The elephant has always been a symbol of royalty and a symbol of wealth. If you own an elephant, it's like having a Mercedes or a BMW. It is an awesome creature: intelligent, gentle, and strong. Whenever I see one, so large, but so incredibly quiet, I stop and hold my breath.'

But the tide of general opinion is turning, and many Indians have lost patience with the increasingly unpredictable behaviour of elephants. Last year, more than 400 people were killed by rampaging elephants - 55 of them in Bengal. As a result, half of the Bengali herds are peppered with shotgun pellets. It is not surprising that they are constantly angry.

'The Bengal elephant population is doomed,' predicts Mark Shand. 'They are too fragmented, they haven't got enough room, and there is nowhere for them to go. They are becoming brazen - they no longer just come out at night, they come out in the day, too. There have been cases where villagers have thrown burning torches at them, and the elephants have picked them up and thrown them back. It won't be long before there is stronger retribution. The young people now want all the elephants shot.'

At Baintgoorie Tea Garden, 10km from Mal Bazar, Shukra Pando limps towards us. Outside his primitive bamboo hut with its corrugated-iron roof, he tells how he barely survived an elephant attack in which his friend died, crushed by the foot of a big tusker, his neck broken and his torso badly mangled. Yashoda, the dead man's widow, looks sullen as Shukra recalls the incident. A large crowd gathers, stepping round the free-roaming chickens and goats, drawn by the gory tale. 'We had been at a cock fight,' explains the former labourer, who on that night staggered home, drunk on *hadia*. 'We took a short cut through the tea garden. An elephant came at us from the back and charged. He crushed my friend. I ran and fell over, but couldn't get up. The elephant kicked me and I fainted. He broke my hip. I was in hospital for a few weeks, and I cannot work now.'

Back at Baradighi, where terrified labourers refuse to sleep in their houses, and take refuge in the factory, Nakat Badai lifts his shirt to show me an angry scar running down his stomach. 'Two years ago, a young tusker came to my house looking for food,' he says. 'I charged outside. The elephant caught me on his trunk,

away their habitat. Where can they go? Where can we go?'

then I passed out. He ripped open my stomach. I was unconscious for three days. When I came to, I had 32 stitches and three broken ribs.' He says he is not angry with the elephant, just glad he managed to save his wife and five-year-old child.

It used to be that, just as the Indians respected the elephant, the elephant had a healthy respect for them. In the garden, Ravinder's servants are handing round ginger cake and pouring home-grown tea as he tells another story, which illustrates the elephant's capacity for guilt and shame.

'Six years ago, one of our workers left his hut for a call of nature, and startled a nearby elephant. It picked him up, took him away, and gored him to death with its tusks. It was a deliberate, vicious attack. Then it covered him with weeds to hide his body.' It seemed the elephant was ashamed, and was trying to hide evidence of its wicked deed. Then, it seemed, it had an attack of conscience: 'After the man's funeral, the elephant visited the grave every day for ten days. It didn't trample it, it just stood next to it as a mark of respect.'

The situation is serious, so what is being done? At a local level, the tea-planters have tried electric fences, but the elephants found their tusks did not conduct the current and knocked them down. There is a government elephant patrol to scare starving elephants away from the villages and tea gardens, and we joined the Mal squad one night - a terrifying experience.

The rangers have one Land-Rover equipped with a powerful turret searchlight, a few boxes of firecrackers, and a couple of ancient rifles. The eight men, all so slight we wondered if they could strangle a chicken between them, pulled down their hand-knitted balaclavas, and prepared for action.

At 8.47pm, there was a distress call from Batbari Farm. Three elephants were wrecking workers' houses. Chief ranger Prabhat Kumar Das gave the order to move out, and fifteen minutes later we arrived just in time to see one tusker wrecking its sixth hut. The Land-Rover screeched to a halt as three huge, grey shapes appeared in the gloom. One elephant turned to face us, trumpeting and threatening to charge. Then the shouting began. One ranger lit a string of firecrackers, another fired a volley of shots in the air. Villagers gathered behind us waving burning torches, and the elephants stopped chewing for a moment. Tentatively, they

took a few steps towards us, and the driver slammed the Land-Rover into reverse in case they charged. As more firecrackers were thrown, and more rifles fired, at last the elephants began to retreat.

These methods offer no long-term solution, and, on an international level, animal-lovers such as Mark Shand are scrambling to help. They need co-operation from governments, help to teach people how to cohabit with the elephant, and, most importantly, huge tracts of land to set aside where the elephant can live in peace.

'You're dealing with a formidable and very cunning animal which is changing quickly,' says Mark, who spends as much time as he can fund-raising. 'Translocation [moving elephants to safer habitats] is a very expensive process. They haven't got it right yet; there are always fatalities, and you have to move whole herds. It's like me or you being moved from a busy city like London to the Outer Hebrides. It would be so hard for us to adjust, and very hard for us to be accepted.'

'With elephants it is the same. They've got to get on with the other families in the new area, and the other families are likely to think that there is not enough land and start pushing them out. Then the aggression starts.'

As a trustee of the charity Fauna & Flora, Mark has recently won the support of the Vietnamese government, which is keen to save its tiny population of 400 elephants. Despite small successes, Mark fears it is an uphill struggle. 'I honestly think we shall have to lose a couple of major species before anyone realises how serious the problem is. If the tiger or the rhino disappeared, it would make people think, "Yes, this can actually happen - and in our lifetime."'

To illustrate the seriousness of the situation, Mark quotes Douglas Chadwick, author of *Fate of the Elephant*. 'It occurred to me that the fate of the last true land giants might teach all of us what the future might be like insofar as elephant conservation measures our willingness to protect large areas of the natural world. If we are not able to safeguard wild lands in sufficiently big tracts, then the processes and patterns that shaped existing biological communities can no longer operate as they have for millions of years, and that would mark the end of natural history.'

As Mark says, 'This is a real sobering thought.'

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