

The Great Indian Elephant Book: An Anthology of Writing on Elephants in the Raj. Dhriti K. Lahiri-Choudhury (ed.). Oxford University Press, New Delhi. 1999. 459 pp. Price: Rs 595/US \$ 14.

It is said that any matter being published by the Oxford University Press (OUP) is like being married to a Duchess; the honour is greater than the pleasure. But on reading Lahiri-Choudhury's book, it appears that the former Professor of English at Calcutta's Rabindra Bharati University and one of the founder members of the IUCN's Asian Elephant Specialist Group, must have derived great pleasure too in compiling the collection of excerpts on the changing perception of the Indian elephant and the sportsman's ways with it under the British Raj. In his introduction, which is the best item in the book, Lahiri-Choudhury provides an extremely interesting analysis of the use and abuse of the elephant in war and peace in the nineteenth century by the British colonial rulers even as they were hunting it across its range in the Indian subcontinent. He is well placed to comment on both the hunter and the hunted, as he too had brought down a couple of magnificent rogues with his rifle (although not for sport but in response to growing conflict between man and beast in north-eastern India).

Lahiri-Choudhury's book deals with the period that began in 1773 when British rule was imposed in India, and where the elephant itself subsequently became the emblem of imperial power. The book also covers Ceylon (Sri Lanka) given its geo-cultural and historical links with India. In his book, Lahiri-Choudhury attempts to discuss two aspects of the elephant: the changing perception of the elephant and the sportsman's ways with it. When the British took control of the Indian subcontinent, elephant and other wildlife were so numerous that people were encouraged to hunt and eliminate them in vast numbers. Sport was an abiding passion for the British, hunting and polo for the upper classes, a bit of football for the lower orders. As Ann Morrow points out in her book *The Maharajas of India*, sport was thought an important way of 'sweating the sex' out of the other ranks. The British upper classes loved big-game hunting wherever they went, blood sports being the closely guarded privilege of the top drawers. But not everyone who was

sent to rule India during the British Raj, came from the ruling class. Hunting was not just a sport, but a symbol of status as well, the criterion being the number of animals one shot. The size of the hunted increased the status of the hunter so much that some measuring tapes that were used had 11 inches to a foot! Thus, big-game hunting, as Lahiri-Choudhury argues, became a short-cut to the status of being a gentleman. That was their way of proving their credentials to their peers. But hardly any colonial who shot elephants recognized the courage of the native trackers and *shikaris*, who often went ahead of the well-armed white *sahib*! Even G. P. Sanderson sent two of his unarmed trackers ahead of him after wounding an elephant. Shooting elephants was far more thrilling than hunting foxes back home. No wonder then Lord Curzon once implored a friend of his to 'come and stay with us and we will arrange for you to shoot tigers from the back of elephants or elephants from the back of tigers'. Both the Indian princes and their British guests were inveterate hunters. In some princely states of the Maharajas, hunting was a major form of recreation and dead elephant's feet held umbrellas; tusks were used for gongs, and the penis made a stalwart golfbag! For the Hindus however, the elephant being a symbol of Lord Ganesha, its killing is and has always been taboo. While the upper class Englishmen loved the sport of elephant hunting, the upper class Hindus loathed it. Even in predominantly Buddhist Ceylon, elephant hunting was never popular among the people, although capturing and training elephants for use in war and peace was an established art. Elephants were protected by kings in Ceylon, and it was in 1826 that their hunting became an accepted form of sport. At least 40,000 Asian elephants were killed or captured during the past century in India alone.

The book is divided into four sections: the first deals with the changing perceptions of the people who hunted elephants; the second deals with the dangers associated with the game of shooting elephants in India; the third deals with encounters of elephants in Burma, and the fourth is confined to Ceylon. These carefully selected excerpts from 23 contributors, provide us a historical perspective of the changing attitude of the colonial hunter to the elephant and his role in its endan-

germent. Lahiri-Choudhury begins his anthology with W. W. Hunter's account of William Makepeace Thackeray, grandfather of the novelist, who at the age of 17 joined the East India Company in East Bengal (Bangladesh today) at an annual salary of Rs 495 (or 62 pounds). Thackeray augmented his meagre salary by private trade of supplying elephants for the Company's troops. He became a mighty hunter of elephants. His main source of income was the destruction of tigers and the capture of wild elephants. The attitude of the colonials changes from regarding the elephant as an instrument of short-term profit to valuing it subsequently for pleasure, when it became an object of sport hunting. The Government of the day in fact promoted the slaughter by offering a bounty for each animal that was killed. The impact of this policy was seriously felt in South India and Ceylon where elephants declined substantially in both range and number. In Sri Lanka, Samuel Baker and his colleagues were responsible for wiping out entire herds of elephants, collecting only their tails as trophies from the largely tuskless individuals. Baker even explains the difference between killing and shooting an elephant. Furthermore, since elephants were so numerous and widely distributed, there was hardly any recognition of the need to conserve the species. It was F. W. Champion who became appalled at the mindless slaughter of the magnificent animal, which he referred to as 'perhaps the finest of God's wild creatures'.

But the real study of wild elephants according to Lahiri-Choudhury, began with Captain Thomas Williamson in 1807, and continued with the publications by Sir Emerson Tennent in 1867 and G. P. Sanderson in 1878. Tennent's authority lost out to Sanderson's in due course. A few of Tennent's contemporaries did not take his writings seriously. John Macdonald Henderson used an old quip to describe it - 'all that is true in it is not new and what is new in it is not true'. Sanderson rubbished Tennent's work, *The Wild Elephant*, being 'full of the errors which are unavoidable when a man writes on a subject with which he has no practical acquaintance...'. Sir Emerson Tennent was nicknamed 'Sir Timorsome Emmet' by his colleagues in Ceylon, on account of his exploit in running away from a crowd! Elephants in the wild were studied over the barrels of a rifle first before

binoculars and notebooks replaced them. G. P. Sanderson's *Thirteen Years Among the Wild Beasts of India*, published in 1878, still remains a classic. Col. F. T. Pollock on the other hand, was spot on when he compared the temperament of an elephant under stress, to that of women – 'uncertain, coy and difficult to please'. He also correctly measured the approximate shoulder height of an elephant by multiplying the circumference of its forefoot by two – a fact that was well known to the elephant catchers in Ceylon long before Pollock's time.

Reading Lahiri-Choudhury's carefully selected excerpts makes it clear that a number of hunters contradict each other on the basis of their own experiences and ignorance. There is considerable confusion over the longevity of the species in the wild. While Tennent, on the information he received from knowledgeable natives estimated it as 70 years, he also quotes one Colonel Robertson, who found a domesticated elephant in Ceylon, whose records indicated that it might have lived to more than 140 years! Sanderson betrayed his ignorance of the average life span of an elephant in the wild by putting it around 150 years. One of the most renowned travellers of the seventeenth century, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier too mentions in his classic, *Travels in India* that 'an elephant's age sometimes amounts to 120 or 130'. Furthermore, the exploits of the British hunters were published largely for the consumption of the British audience both in the colonies and in the mother country. Such publications appeared in *Country Life* and *Field* in England. The natives did not exit in the subconscious of the colonials. An exception is Sanderson, who acknowledges the fact that 'the elephant is essentially a native's animal. Natives alone have fully studied his peculiarities and classified him into castes; his capture, training and keeping are in native hands, as well as the trade; and the native standard of merit regulates the market...' The exploits of the colonial hunters do not advance the cause of elephant conservation today. Elephant and wildlife conservation in the Indian sub-continent grew out of the innate concern of the Buddhists and Hindus for the welfare of the animals. However, the need to set up special reserves for protecting wildlife, including the elephant, arose from a concern by the very people who exploited wildlife – namely the British

colonial hunters – who feared that at the rate they were exterminating wildlife, there would be no game left for hunting!

Lahiri-Choudhury's book provides interesting reading for the wealth of first hand information it contains on the elephant both in the wild and in captivity. As many of the primary sources, Lahiri-Choudhury has consulted are no longer readily available to those of us working outside India, the book becomes a valuable adjunct. It also helps us understand the time and culture and mind-set of the colonials who took to the sport of big game-hunting. If there is a message in the book, it is that an understanding of the past could be the beginning of wisdom.

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The Khulgad Project – An Experiment in Sustainable Development. K. S. Valdiya (ed.) Gyanodaya Prakashan, Nainital, India. 1998. 134 pp. Price not stated.

The book under review reflects the coordinated efforts of a team of sincere scientific and social workers. Sustainable development is the need of the hour today. The organization called Central Himalayan Environment Association (CHEA) at Nainital has done a commendable job in performing this experiment on sustainable development selecting the Khulgad catchment as the project area. The selection of the site is ideal and the vision for attempts to develop the hill region is extraordinary.

K. S. Valdiya has compiled and edited the set of relevant papers in a lucid and befitting manner. All the papers truly reflect the aspirations of the people. The paper entitled 'Building effective and lasting organizational culture for developmental changes' by D. P. Joshi, por-

trays a vivid description of the project pertaining to the national scenario of the state-of-the-art CHEA's objectives and modus operandi, its goal and the administrative and financial management of the embarked project. The paper entitled 'Appropriate land use and development of sustainable agriculture in Uttarkhand: 'Learning lessons of the Khulgad micro-watershed project' by S. L. Shah and T. C. Upreti, reflects the appropriate land use strategies, the method of identification of technology package, modus operandi of programme implementation as well as application of the project. However, the diagrams have not been properly captioned.

Water is generally scarce in the hill regions. As such, it must be well-managed and conserved. The paper entitled 'Management of water resources: Spring sanctuaries' by S. P. Rai *et al.*, opines that the discharge patterns indicate that the amount of spring discharge is controlled by geological structures and secondarily by land use pattern and the nature and extent of vegetal cover. Such an original finding has further been emphasized by their assertion that the principle underlying the development of a spring sanctuary is that the rainwater infiltration in the identified re-charge area be induced or increased by resorting to engineering and biological methods so that there is an augmented discharge in the springs downslope.

U. C. Shah's paper entitled 'Increasing farmer's income through horticulture' is very attractive and encouraging in view of the simple method of generating income and employment through community horticulture.

Male dominance is sometimes a curse in the Indian society, particularly in the tribal community in the hills. Anuradha Pande in her article on 'Gender perspective in the Khulgad project' has brought out the worries and aspirations of the women as well as the challenges they have taken up in resource management; also, the efforts made by them in bridging the gap by setting up different women's groups in managing the resources.

The fragile environment of today needs immediate ecocodevelopment for the sake of human beings and other organisms living in it. A. D. Moddie has very lucidly and vividly described sustainable ecocodevelopment through a case study.