

Opinion :

Once again we have been confronted with a painful situation of a well-known and respected elephant expert having been attacked and flayed by a few persons in the various animal communities who have not understood the subtle, dangerous and delicate nature of the task undertaken. Parbati Baruah, an experienced mahout with particular expertise in capturing elephants and training wild elephants, was asked to capture a rogue elephant which had been inexpertly immobilised. It suffered a wound which did not heal and probably led to its death.

Parbati Baruah is known to me for some years. I have observed her working with elephants, training mahouts, treating elephants injuries on several occasions. I was not at the scene of the incident and know no more than the film maker who produced a documentary on this item without visiting the field or interviewing Ms. Baruah, but I know Parbati Baruah and I trust her version absolutely.

This case reminds me a lot of the time that the late Dr. V. Krishnamurthy treated and trained "Moorthy", the elephant which sustained a rope wound on his foot which did not heal for a long time. The animal welfare community accused Dr. K. of all kinds of cruelties and made an international item of this. This was the single accusation in a lifetime of healing and saving elephants. It pained many of us who knew Dr. K.

In fact no animal welfare person that is known to me now has ever trained a rogue elephant. "Affection training" or "positive reinforcement" as it is more appropriately called are definitely preferable to any methods of force in training, but some animals are not in a mental condition to accept this type of training. In order to bring them to a manageable state, some tying and prodding are required.

Controlling a rogue elephant and staying alive oneself is a art and craft which involves a measure of "tough love" for some time. The alternative is that the elephant can be destroyed, an option legally available to forest departments but one which they do not like to avail. This is not out of love for the elephant necessarily, although no forester likes to see a wild animal put down, but because of the official's terror of the animal welfare community and their scathing remarks, which are happily taken up by a starving press. I think the forest departments are not doing the animal and certainly not the trainers a favour by trying to save themselves from the opprobrium of the animal welfare community by trying to train a rogue. If the press and the animal welfare folks would try and learn what is involved in this process, instead of snatching up the issue as an opportunity to promote themselves, then it would be great to save the life of every elephant. A rogue elephant is comparable to a man-eating tiger I should think. Why dont we train these tigers too!

I cannot do much for Parbati Baruah as her detractors have laid a cunning path. I can give space here for her side of the story, which those who have publicised this incident to death, have not. Her version, which I accept 100%, follows.

Sally Walker

Facts regarding the capture and death of a wild elephant in Chattisgarh.

For quite sometime now, a vilification campaign is being carried out against me in the media by some vested interests. They have blamed me for capturing of an elephant calf in Chattisgarh using an 'archaic' method called Mela Shikar and then killing him by inflicting deliberate cruelty, by starving him, beating him mercilessly, removing his tusks and by gouging out his eyes. **Each and every allegation made against me is false** and reflects the ignorance of the persons involved in this campaign of the situation. I am compelled to bring the facts of the case before your kindself to clarify my position.

1. I have been living with elephants ever-since I was born. I come from a celebrated family in Gauripur in Assam known for capturing and training of elephants since many generations. I captured my first elephant in Assam at the age of 14 by Mela Shikar- a method of capturing elephants which needs a lot of courage.

I have put all my knowledge about elephants to the welfare of elephants and in resolving human-elephant conflict. I have received the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)'s award 'Global 500- Roll of Honour' in 1989. I was felicitated by the Chief Minister of Assam during the 43rd Wildlife Week in October 1997 for outstanding work on wildlife conservation. In January 2003, Assam Government appointed me as the Honorary Chief Elephant Warden of Assam. I am a member of the Asian Elephant Specialist Group of the IUCN / Species Survival Commission. I have contributed articles in various magazines and I have acted as a resource person in a number of training workshops. The point that I am trying to make is that I have no less credentials than the persons pointing their fingers at me. I am very sad that the elephant captured in Chattisgarh did not survive, but the allegation made by these persons that I killed the elephant deliberately through cruelty is a complete untruth.

Elephants are a way of life for me and I love elephants much more than these persons who are shedding crocodile's tears and trying to gain cheap publicity at my cost. The following points are a summary of the case:

(a) I came to Chattisgarh only after desperate requests by the State Forest Department. They wanted my services to provide kunkis (that is trained elephants), phandis and mahouts and also my expert help in driving away wild elephants and in training of the three elephants which are already in captivity in Tamoringla Sanctuary and other elephants if caught. I was told that they have failed to get help from Karnataka and other States. I was informed that the forest officers were being *gheraoed* and being harassed by the general public and politicians. It was under such circumstances that I agreed to help the State Forest Department. I despatched two kunkis with nine phandis and mahouts who reached Chattisgarh on 18th December. I also joined them some days later. I had not approached or lobbied with the State Government for any assignment or contract. I have not signed any contract with the State

Government for capturing of elephants. The so-called 'Rs.36 lakh contract' is an estimate of the State Forest Department and also includes items of work to be done departmentally. I have received only the wages and expenses of my kunki elephants and support staff. Entire programme was fully funded by the State Government.

(b) The collective experience of my professional team for Chattisgarh exceeds over 200 years of working with elephants and includes capture of 75 wild elephants and training of over 380 elephants- both wild and captive born. Obviously, I had put up a fully competent team.

(c) We initially camped at Dharamjaigarh which was the worst affected area of Chattisgarh. But quite soon, I was asked by the Chief Wildlife Warden to shift my camp to Narayanpur in Jashpur Division. **Here for the first time, I was asked verbally to capture elephants by Mela Shikar.** But I did not carry out any capturing because no written instructions were given to me. I advised the forest officers against Mela Shikar because the undulating terrain of Jashpur was not suitable for Mela Shikar. Moreover, with hundreds of curious villagers regularly following the kunkis everywhere, any chase of wild elephants for Mela Shikar would have posed a serious threat to their lives. In fact, a very dangerous situation was created on the early morning of 24th January when a wild tusker entered our camp and thousands of villagers gathered to have a look and did not listen to any plea by the forest officers and the police. It put my staff to considerable strain to keep under check the wild elephant who injured my kunkis in the process. After the dark, when the people dispersed, the elephant was chased away. In fact, I kept my kunkis and staff confined to tracking of wild herds and chasing them away from the agricultural fields throughout my stay in Jashpur. **I did not carry out any Mela Shikar** despite tremendous pressure from senior forest officers and even some local politicians who were probably given a wrong impression by the forest officers that I had come to Chattisgarh just for capturing elephants. **Everything said in the media about the capturing of the elephant in Jashpur by Mela Shikar is an absolute lie** and the persons responsible for feeding this lie should be ashamed of themselves.

(d) On 27th January, Shri Bisen, the Tranquillisation Expert from Kanha Tiger Reserve, reached Jashpur on invitation from the State Forest Department. From 28th January to 5th February, Shri Bisen and his colleague made several unsuccessful attempts to tranquillise a particular bull tusker which was creating trouble in and around Narayanpur. I provided them with the services of my kunkis and staff. The bull tusker was captured by chemical immobilisation on the morning of 6th February and handed over to me for training. This was the same elephant as proclaimed as rogue under Section 11 (1) of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 vide Chief Wildlife Warden's Order No. 2003/2 dated 29.1.2003. The DFO Jashpur was authorised to kill the elephant, but it was instead captured. The elephant had some old injuries on his body and legs. My kunkis were used only to bring the sedated elephant to the camp and for its subsequent management and not for Mela Shikar. The elephant was captured by the State Forest Department of Chattisgarh under Section 11 and not by me as alleged in the media.

(e) Unfortunately, chemical immobilisation was not done in a professional way. This particular elephant was darted 6 times % 2 times on the evening of the 5th February and 4 times on the morning of the 6th February. Four of the darts actually hit the elephant. I am not a tranquillising expert. It is for the experts to say whether the choice and quantity of the drugs administered to the elephant were appropriate. DFO Jashpur Division released Shri Bishen on 7th February despite my advice that he should be retained for some more days to take care of the elephant. During the tranquillisation, one of the darts fired at the elephant at close range on the 5th evening had hit the elephant on its trunk. The elephant shook off the dart and escaped into forests.

I have subsequently talked to an expert of the Wildlife Institute of India. He is of the opinion that a dart carrying a long syringe fired from close quarters and powered with a heavy charge, may damage the tissues of the elephant trunk which may not be visible immediately. In fact, we observed this wound on the trunk a few days later while bathing the elephant. This wound gradually grew in size and puss started coming from it despite all our attempts to treat it. There is no doubt that the accidental hitting of the dart on 5th February led to a serious wound on the trunk of the elephant which could not be healed and proved fatal for the elephant. The overdose of drugs can also probably lead to loss of immunity and natural stamina in the elephant. The forest officers should have looked into this important aspect but they have not.

(f) The veterinary support provided by the Forest Department was inadequate and not on time.

(g) No cruelty was done with the elephant. It was fed and watered properly. It was trained in the usual north-eastern method which is considered safe by the experts for elephants below 7 feet height. The method depends on extensive use of ropes and the injuries sustained by the struggling elephant invariably heal up in due course. The tusks were only slightly trimmed to prevent the elephant from hurting himself or his handlers. It is completely untrue that the eyes of the animal were gouged out. The use of spear was the minimal and confined to self-protection considering that it was a rogue elephant having killed three persons.

No training was given after 14.2.2003 when the elephant was seen to have reduced its intake of fodder.

(i) The casualty of elephants during capturing and training is not an unusual thing. There have been casualties even during the chemical immobilisation and the south-Indian methods under the supervision of the best known experts.

(j) The controversy seems to be led by persons with no field level experience of working with elephants.

Yours truly,

(PARBATI BARUA)

Dated: March 25, 2003