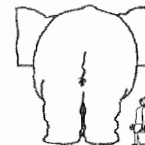

ELEPHANT CAPTURING IN NORTH-EASTERN INDIA

Parbati Baruah



1. Elephants are captured in Assam and the other North-Eastern states either by "KHEDDA" or "MELA SHIKAR".

2. KHEDDA OR GARH-SHIKAR

There are two variations of *Khedda* as practiced in Assam, viz., the *Pung Garh* and the *Dandi Garh*.

2.1 Pung Garh

"*Pung*", in local dialect, refers to a natural source of salt used by wild animals. In this method, a big enclosure (called stockade) of stout wooden poles is erected at a convenient place near a natural salt-lick, but away from the path taken by the elephants to reach the saltlick. The stockade is suitably camouflaged from inside as well as outside. The approach to the stockade is shaped like a funnel (called "*Rangi*" in local dialect) by suitably dressing the nearby forests and by using wooden posts and brushwood if so needed. Persons atop watch towers keep watch over the movement of elephant herds to the saltlick. As soon as a herd starts its return journey from the salt lick, it is obstructed on the way and driven carefully by shikaris and "beaters" towards the "*rangi*" using crackers and other noise-making instruments. As soon as the herd enters the stockade, its gate is slammed shut, using a trapping mechanism. A wide trench runs inside the stockade along the wall to dissuade the elephants from using their full might to break through the stockade. Help of *koonki* elephants is taken to noose and bring out the wild elephants selected for domestication. Usually big and old elephants, pregnant elephants or those with suckling calves and elephants below 4 feet of height are permitted to escape.

2.2 Dandi Garh

In local parlance, "*Dandi*" refers to the migratory path of elephant herds. In this method, a stockade is made at a convenient place on the migratory route of the elephants just before their seasonal movement starts. A herd is located when still at some distance from the stockade and then driven vigorously from behind till it runs into the stockade and gets trapped.

3. MELA SHIKAR

In local parlance, "*mela shikar*" refers to hunting in the open i.e., capturing of elephants in the forests without erecting a stockade. Essentially the method involves the chase of wild elephants by using trained elephants (*koonkies*) and noosing them when the opportunity arises. In fact, *mela shikar* is much more popular in N.E. India than the *khedda*. A variation of *mela shikar* is known as the "*Gazali Shikar*". *Gazali* refers to the young shoots of grasses that sprout up during pre-monsoon showers in May-June. Elephants are very fond of *gazali* and are attracted towards grassy patches wherever they are and provide a good opportunity to the *mela shikaris*.

3.1 Preparation For *Mela Shikar*

3.1.1 *Mela shikar* is usually practiced in winters (October to March) with the exception of *Gazali shikar* which, as stated above, is carried out in May-June. *Mela shikar* is not done during the monsoon due to practical difficulties. The preparations for *mela shikar*, however, start much in advance.

3.1.2 A standard team for *mela shikar* consists of a *koonki* elephant, a *phandi* (an expert on noosing a wild elephant), a mahout and a *kamla* (i.e. a grass-cutter). Considering the uneven terrain and dense forests in N.E. India, comparatively smaller (7.5 feet to 8 feet in height) and swift moving elephants are preferred as *koonkies*. Cow elephants and *makenas* (tuskless elephants) are preferred to the tuskers. *Koonkie* elephants are specially trained to chase the wild elephants, help in noosing them and drag them to the depot. They are particularly trained to follow "foot commands" from their mahouts and to move silently during the entire capturing operation. The *phandi* and the mahout must have a complete understanding with each other as well as with the *koonki* under their command. It is the duty of the *kamla* to look after the feeding and other requirements of the *koonki* back at the camp.

3.1.3 Number of *mela shikar* teams is selected depending upon the number of wild elephants proposed to be captured -- usually one team of shikaris can take care of only two or three wild elephants during the season. Some big *koonkies* including tuskers are also required for handling the captured elephants at the depots and for imparting training to them.

3.1.4 In N.E. India jute ropes are used for elephant capturing as these cause insignificant and easily curable injuries to the elephants. Before the actual operation, ropes of different thickness, lengths and knots are prepared and kept in readiness.

* Mahout, Elephant Trainer, Assam

3.2 Operation

3.2.1 As soon as an elephant herd is located, it is given a chase by two or more *koonkies*. The objective is to wear out the elephants or to force them towards a hilly region or a big river or any other area where their movements are retarded. A target elephant (usually in the height range of 5.5 feet to 7.5 feet) is selected and attempts are made to isolate the same from the herd. Once the target elephant is isolated, the phandi throws the "phand" (noose) over the neck of the elephant and tries to restrain it with the help of the *koonkie*.

3.2.2 During the entire operation, the *phandi* occupies the front seat on the elephant and the mahout controls the *koonkie* from its back. He also keeps watch on the other wild elephants when the *phandi* is busy with his quarry.

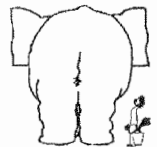
3.2.3 The captured elephant is then dragged to the training depot with the help of one or two *koonkies*. The captured elephant is treated for injuries, if any. It is handed over to the training *koonkies*. To begin with, two *koonkies* are needed to handle the wild elephant but after 8-10 days of training, just one *koonkie* is sufficient. The wild elephant remains at the depot for 3-4 weeks during which period, it is familiarised with human touch and voice through different rituals involving caressing and a recital of folk songs. It is also taught to follow the following four commands, viz., *Dhaat* (i.e. stand still), *Agait* (i. e. walk forward), *Pichhu* (i.e. walk backward) and *Cheyi* (i.e. turn left or right). The wild elephant can now be handled without the help of *koonkies* and it is sent to the regular elephant camp where further training is imparted.

4. COMPARISON OF MELA SHIKAR WITH KHEDDA

As stated earlier, *mela shikar* is more popular in the N. E. India than the *khedda*. *Khedda* involves very large expenditure and can be organised only near a salt lick or a known migratory path. Success rate of *khedda* is very low as compared to *mela shikar*. *Mela Shikar* is relatively cheaper and offers much more liberty regarding the area of operation, but it is not suitable for capturing elephants of big size (say, of the height above 7.5 feet). *Mela Shikar* involves considerable risk for the *phandi* and the *koonkie* and cases of their getting injured or even killed are not uncommon. There is also a chance of the captured wild elephant getting suffocated if the knot of the noose is not correct. All said and done, *mela shikar* has become an art and a tradition with the people of N.E.India.

IMAGE AND PROFESSION OF MAHAUTS IN NORTH EASTERN INDIA

Parbati Baruah



1. Usually the mahouts in N.E. India come from among the tribals and the so called "lower castes", but the muslims and the upper caste Hindu mahouts are not uncommon. Until recently, there were many families in Assam which produced generation after generation of mahouts.

2. Elephants have been domesticated in N.E. India since time immemorial and both the elephant and the mahout have become a part of the folklore and the folksongs. Stories of brave and expert *phandis* (noosers) and mahouts are passed on from generation to generation. In rural Assam mahouts are looked upon with awe and admiration and it is not unusual for village belles to fall in love with young mahouts. An average Assamese mahout is a jolly, good natured person - an accomplished folk singer and is very much in demand in local functions and ceremonies. With his capacity to control such a big and powerful animal as the elephant, mahouts are often associated with supernatural powers and invited to act as "faith healers" or "Ojhas". Some of them practice witchcraft. Many of the mahouts have made a name for their knowledge of medicinal herbs.

3. Grass cutters, mahouts and *phandis* form their own closely knit society - having their own rules, regulations and code of discipline. They have their own informal "university" and their own system of "examination". A mahout becomes a *phandi* after passing a rigorous test conducted by other *phandis*. Only a few *phandis* can aspire to become *Baro - Phandi* which is equivalent to a master's degree in elephant management. *Phandis* and *baro-phandis* derive maximum respect in the society of mahouts and they are also held in esteem by the elephant owners and government officials. In the elephant catching operation in N.E. India, *phandis* and *baro-phandis* are the key persons and they are often known to dictate their own terms.

4. Besides the Forest Department, there are hundreds of private persons owning elephants in N.E. India. Given the typical terrain of N.E. India, elephants are going to stay as a means of transportation, logging, tourism and forest protection. As such, the demand for good mahouts and *phandis* will always be there.

* Mahout, Elephant Trainer, Assam