

## “Mainao” – An Account of How Wildlife and People Continue to Get Caught in Our Struggle to Balance Livelihoods and Conservation

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A cold December night. Mist lies over the village of Kokilabari in the Baksa district of Assam as people take in the last traces of warmth before the winds douse the bonfires. Children are already half-asleep, and the lights fade from the porches of the villages one by one. Time approaches 9 p.m. and there is a zip and a zap – far out of the reach of the ears of sleep-lulled people. Little did they know, within less than 300 m of their boundary with Manas National Park, an elephant mother struggles to breathe her last dying breaths. The worse part? Her one-year-old calf is right beside her, standing witness to her death.

On the night of 3rd December 2021, a female elephant was electrocuted near the Kokilabari Seed-farm of Baksa, along the southern boundary of Manas National Park (MNP) in its easternmost range of Bhuyanpara. The reason was an illegally installed electric fence. MNP, which unfortunately doesn't have a buffer zone like Kaziranga National Park, has a shared boundary with a large area of paddy fields, agricultural plots, plantations and even backyards of people's homes in some villages. A small dirt road is what separates the protected and non-protected area. This close association results in a multitude of issues, human-wildlife conflict being the main one. People here have many strategies to deal with conflicts of this sort. The biggest conflict is with elephants, which occurs during the agricultural seasons, which roughly fall in the months of May-June to November-December.

It is a common occurrence during the fall or winter, for elephants to come out of their habitats, lured by the prospect of plentiful agricultural produce including numerous standing paddy varieties that Assam is famous for. On

the other hand, people desperately try to protect the fruits of their hard labour. They use a number of tactics like fire torches, firecrackers, loud sounds with bamboo instruments and light. They spend many a night, freezing, on platforms commonly called machaans, made on high stilts or trees, while guarding their crops. Forest officials also remain vigilant all night, responding to calls of elephant stray-outs. Government installed electric fences in the central range (Bansbari) of MNP has brought down the number of incidents of human-elephant conflicts to an extent, but the eastern (Bhuyanpara) and western (Panbari) Ranges are still somewhat behind.

The next morning of the incident, forest officials from Bhuyanpara Range Office and Maozi anti-poaching Forest Camp (within 250 m of the incident) rushed to the spot where the villagers had already gathered. A gruesome scene awaited them. The body of the deceased lay on the ground with a thick aluminium wire near her head. The calf, beside the carcass of its mother, was scared and inconsolable. Villagers, officials from the department and conservationists gathered in the area and couldn't help but sob at the heart-breaking condition of the baby elephant. With tear-streaked cheeks, no one was entirely sure what they were witnessing. Was it a murder? Was it an accident? Is this survival? Is this injustice? No one could really answer. The calf struggled for a long time, shrieking in anger and being at times, quite violent towards the frontline staff trying to rescue her. After a tiresome ordeal, they were able to put her in a forest rescue vehicle (Fig. 1). She was immediately transported to the Hati Mahal Camp in Bansbari, a camp known very well for showcasing elephants with their mahouts.

The post-mortem was done on scene, the reason of death was confirmed to be electrocution and she was buried on the spot. After careful examination, it was revealed that she received a shock straight on her head in the front of her trunk. Failure of the central nervous system and haemorrhages in vital organs like heart, coronary vessels, brain and spinal cord revealed the impact of a severe electrical impulse, causing a few seconds of agonising pain and an almost instant death.

On the afternoon of 15th January 2022, I decided to visit the little orphaned calf. I was made aware that she was under rehabilitation in the same camp she was first taken to and under close observation by the park veterinarian. After a few calls with my supervisors and then the Range officer of Bansbari, I finally had the opportunity to see her. Standing among 5 other towering elephants, was this tiny (in elephant language) calf, eating fresh grass in the golden light of the setting sun (Fig. 2). The people who took care of her said they had never seen an angrier elephant calf before. She screamed for her mother for a week straight, sometimes through the entire night, having manic episodes of violence towards her caretakers so much so that they had to restrain her from harming anyone. But, through the anger, their hearts broke for this baby calf that just spent an entire night crying for her mother – who died right in front of her eyes. “We can’t even imagine what this little one went through... *Maakok amie marisu, eitya amie eir maak*” (Assamese translation: Since

we have snatched her mother from her, we are her mother now)”, they sigh. Her primary caretaker said the first time he laid eyes on her, he named her Mainao, after Goddess Lakshmi. I asked why they decided on that name. They said Lakshmi represents abundance... this calf came to them with an abundance of grief, and slowly they will make her abundant in happiness. She has calmed down since then and is eating healthy. She has periods of low moods in which she becomes reclusive. This was expected, since the mother-daughter bond is extremely strong in elephants.

While the pre-weaning period in elephants lasts up to 2–3 years, the daughters stay with the mother their entire lives. Hence, they never really separate. There also have been studies on the psyche of elephants who, apart from being highly intelligent, also experience the same emotions as human beings - empathy and fear being the strongest ones. According to studies by prominent elephant psychologist Michele Franko, a Research Associate at the Kerulos Centre and a senior sanctuary elephant carer, “all elephants have permanent life-long injuries and are plagued with psychological trauma symptoms.” We can only hope our little Mainao has the strength to deal with her pain because she will definitely not forget it.

Mainao’s mother is one of the 70+ elephants that died in the Indian state of Assam in 2021, according to official records; and one of the around 14 elephants dying in the state due to



**Figure 1.** Carcass with village onlookers. Behind: Mainao is being reluctantly loaded on to a rescue vehicle by forest officials. Photo © Forest Department, Manas National Park, Assam.

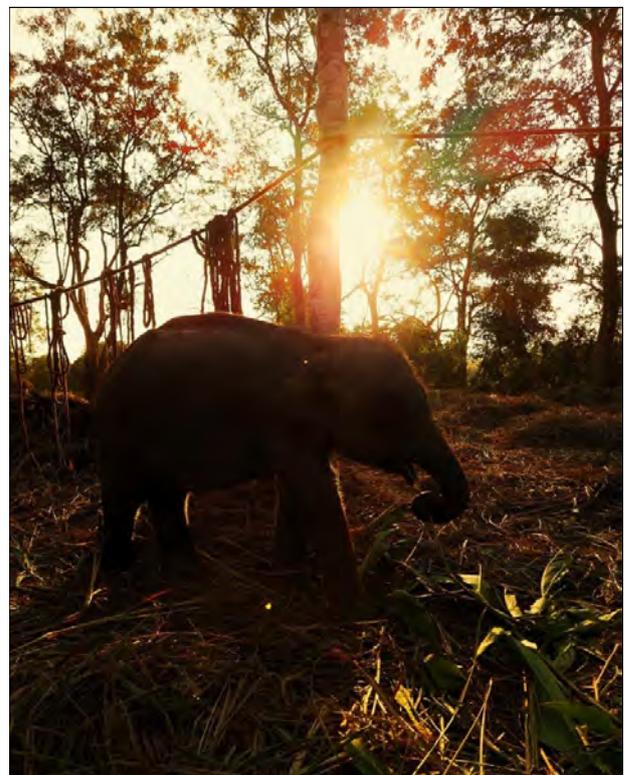
electrocution by illegal electric fences installed around paddy fields. A few months before the Kokilabari incident, on 21st August 2021, two adult female elephants were electrocuted near the Batabari Reserve Forest in Baksa. On 3rd September 2021, an elephant was electrocuted near Mirza, Kamrup District while 15th and 25th October 2021, saw two elephants being electrocuted to death in Goalpara and Guwahati respectively. As many as 600 elephants have been killed by electrocution in India from 2009 to 2020, according to the Ministry of Environment Forests and Climate Change (MoEF&CC). Assam, with the State with the second largest elephant population in India with over 3700 elephants, also has the second largest number of conflict cases between people and elephants.

Apart from elephants, people involved in conflicts are affected a great deal too. A total of 60 people were reported to have died in Assam in 2021, in conflicts with elephants. Only a week after the Kokilabari Incident, on 10th December 2021, a mother and child were accidentally hit, when Forest department personnel shot at a stray elephant in the Bondapara area, Kamrup, a tactic sometimes used to chase stray elephants away from agricultural fields. Two-year-old Arbi Daimary died of a bullet wound while her mother survived with injuries. This is a stark reminder that while we deliberate and debate on solutions, both sides in the conflict continue to suffer.

Man-elephant conflict is not new in Assam, nor will it be easy to overcome. Crimes against elephants are also not out of variety - train accidents have already claimed 5 elephants this year while 4 were poisoned to death. Solutions are many, but which one would work? According to Dr. Bibhab Kr. Talukdar, the Secretary General and CEO of Aaranyak and the Chair, IUCN SSC Asian Rhino Specialist Group, immediate and doable things like mass awareness, immediate and reasonable compensation for damages, proper coordination between Forest and Railways officials and adequate facilities to village defence personnel to monitor movement of elephants should be undertaken. Habitat restoration is one potential solution but how long will it take to restore and refill the gaps that human

beings have created? How many elephants will die till then? How many people? Is compensation really the solution? Is firing a solution? All of these remains a grey area in conservation. Since the incident in Kokilabari, single line electric fences have been installed by the Forest Department in the boundary of Bhuyanpara, MNP. Forest officials, who are at high alert for elephants entering the villages during the agricultural season, are hopeful that it will be instrumental in addressing the conflict issues next year.

Amongst all the snags and solutions, the cases of Mainao and Arbi reminds us that caught between the mess of conflict and conservation, we lose at both ends. Let us not forget that this case is among a hundred cases of human-elephant conflicts that plague Assam every year. They were victims of deliberations, debates, discussions and delayed decisions in conservation forums. Nobody wins-, everyone suffers. These two incidents serve as stark reminders that in the end, we cannot summarise everything into statistics and forget about it. While people who truly suffer will remember, it is time for those who do not suffer also, to remember, reflect and act.



**Figure 2.** Mainao in the Hati Mahal Camp. Photo © Forest Department, Manas National Park, Assam.