

HISTORY OF ELEPHANTS IN CAPTIVITY IN INDIA AND THEIR USE: AN OVERVIEW

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This is a story of captive elephants in India and their use - a period stretching over 5000 years, may be even upto 8000 years or so. As background information one should have an idea of the political geography of ancient India and the generally accepted period - divisions of India's history.

The period divisions are given in the most simplified and broader possible outline, with all their accompanying pitfalls. For example, none of the ancient and medieval empires mentioned covered the entire geographical extent of the sub-continent, but frequently extended to large areas in what is now Afganistan and Central Asia; the Islamic rules never extended over the whole of peninsular India; the British did not become rulers of India all at once in 1757 after the Battle of Plassey; the Mughal emperors continued to be the titular heads in Delhi right upto 1857.

The received view is that the earliest evidence of elephants in captivity comes from the Harappan seals which show elephants with ropes on them. As I see it, these only prove that elephants were captive, but not necessarily domesticated or trained; for no seal shows an elephant with a proper harness or a rider, and this is also true of artifacts of late Harappan culture which the Vedic period overlaps. It is well to remember that speaking of Harappan culture, we are only referring to one corner of India, the riverine tracts of north-western India, the Indus-Saraswati valley. When we speak of Harappan culture we do not speak of the entire subcontinent.

If we look at evidence of cave paintings from other parts of India, we can perhaps push back the history of elephants in domesticity in India by another 400 years or more - to around 6000 B.C. A word of caution: I am making these observations here tentatively, as I am yet to solve the problems of dating the relevant drawing / paintings to my entire satisfaction. Some of these paintings very possibly pre-date Harappan culture and may show positive evidence of elephants under human control.

The Aryans or Aryan-speaking people probably came into India from the Central Asia region around 1500 B.C. The Vedas of the Aryans are a series of compositions - hymns, prayers, poems, rituals, incantations - compiled over a period of a thousand years. The nomadic Aryans brought with them a horse-culture. Even in the *Rig Veda Samhita* (C. 1500 B.C.) we find evidence of elephants being in domesticity, and references to gifts of elephants, richly caparisoned elephants, elephants responding to commands, and even

to villages of elephant keepers, showing that elephants had already become a part of the life of the Rig Vedic Aryans, though I have not come across any reference to use of elephants in war.

We can now offer a model of this development. Aryans came into India from the temperate north-west, and learnt the art of domesticating elephants from the people they subjugated, and in turn used this newly acquired expertise to penetrate and conquer hilly, forest-clad, and frequently swampy tracts further east and toward the south, terrains unsuited to cavalry manoeuvre.

The importance of the domestication of the horse in the spread of neolithic revolution, especially among people of the temperate region, has been the subject of specialist studies. It seems elephants instead of horses played a similar role in the tropical climate of south and south-east Asia - hypothesis on which some of us are now working.

With the establishment of the Kingdom of Magadha (c. 600 B.C.), a new centre of power emerges in the east, in the heart of elephant country and the concept of the four-armed host-chariotry imported from Persia and the dry highlands, cavalry, elephantry and infantry - become firmly established. Alexander fought this four-armed fighting forces of King Poros in 326 B.C. Alexander nearly lost the day to Poros because of the latter's elephant power - the nearest he had ever come to defeat during his campaigns. It was again the story of the elephant power of the King of Magadha that, according to some historians, caused a near-revolt among the forces of Alexander and prevented him from moving further east. This was the West's first serious encounter with elephants in war which led to the introduction of elephants in Indo-Bactrian and Roman armies, and the first western account of the natural history of elephants in Aristotle. With the extension of Aryan power from the Sind valley in the west to the Ganga valley in the east, the real elephant territory, as Alexander notes in 4th century B.C., elephants started playing an increasingly important part in the army as well as in myths and religious rites, the beginning of the real or high elephant culture of India. The consequence of this shift to the east with its softer riverine soil and denser vegetation was that the chariot arm of the four-arm host withered away by approximately 1st century A.D. and elephants started to take an increasingly important part in the army. The king is entitled *Gajapati* or Master of Elephants. The cult of *Ganesh*, the elephant-headed God, is introduced, and various myths are created around elephants. Sculptures from the temple of Konarak in Orissa (13th century A.D.) demonstrate how elephants were used to demolish the native tribal elements as the main arm of the fighting forces of the Aryans pushing into the forested areas, the stronghold of the aborigines.

When the Islamic invasions came, the swift-moving iron-clad cavalry and superior archery won the day against the Hindu deployment of elephants. At the Battle of Khanua (1527) the founder of the Mughal empire in India, Babu, routed the army of Rana Sanga which included 500 war elephants. But the importance of elephants continued, these occasional debacles notwithstanding. The Mughals, once they consolidated their position, became great patrons of elephants. Throughout this period one reads of accounts of war

with more than a thousand elephants employed by a side. The imperial stables under Akbar in his far-flung territory reportedly had 32,000 elephants, and during the reign of his son Emperor Jehangir, 113,000.

Table 1 - Periods of Indian History

Before	c. 2500 B. C.	- Prehistory - overlaps with the Harappan period in many areas.
	c. 2500 - 1500 B. C.	- Harappan Civilization in western India - prehistory.
	c. 1500 - 600 B. C.	- Aryans into India - the Vedic period.
	c. 600 - 321 A. D.	- The rise of the kingdom of Magadha (c. 600 B. C.); Buddha and the rise of Buddhism; Maurya Empire founded (c. 321 B. C.); Satavahan Empire: the age of the final form of the epics, the <i>Ramayana</i> and the <i>Mahabharata</i> .
	321 - 1192 A. D.	- The Classical period of the Imperial Guptas; Harshavardhana of Kanauj in northern India (606-47); the southern kingdoms of the Pallavas, Chalukyas, and Cholas.
	1129 - 1757 A. D.	- The Islamic period: Turkish empire, Afghan rulers, Mughal empire.
	1757 - 1947 A. D.	- British rule.
	1947 -	- The present day.

But slowly and inexorably, increased efficiency and accuracy of musketry and the introduction of mobile canons pushed the elephants back from the front-line to the commissariat. In the Battle of Plassey in 1757 where Clive came out victorious against the Nawab of Bengal and thus laid the foundation of the British Empire in India, elephants were used by the Nawab only in the commissariat and to give occasional push to mobile canons in difficult terrain. Thus a two thousand five hundred year old tradition of using elephants as a fighting force gradually petered out.

We see a new kind of large-scale deployment of elephants from around the 2nd quarter of the 19th century: in *shikar* or big-game hunting. Elephants have been used to hunt game since the time of Emperor Chandragupta Maurya in the 4th century B. C., as Megasthenes (315 B. C.) informs us. Mughal miniatures show emperors hunting from the back of elephants. In the 19th century apparently a new technique emerges: employment of elephants in huge numbers to beat out a cover, particularly the grassy tracts. Maharaja Jung Bahadur Rana (1946) of Nepal employed upto 700 elephants in his famous, or infamous depending on one's way of looking at it, "ring method" of hunting in the grassy tracts of sub-himalayan Nepal or Nepal Terai, as it is known to us. The idea is to completely encircle located tigers with a ring of elephants to prevent their breaking out and allow selected *shikaris* to get in on elephant back, flush out the animals, and deliver the *coup de grace* - altogether a frightening exercise guaranteed to produce charges from cornered tigers in dense, impenetrable cover. The *shikar* party which Sir George Trevelyan joined in 1863 had 48 elephants. Sir Samuel Baker used a very large number of elephants in the "char" or grassy riverine islands of the Brahmaputra river in eastern India in 1885. The Maharaja of Coochbehar's *shikar* party frequently used nearly hundred elephants or more to beat out game and carry the guns. This, in addition to regular employment in administration, communication in accessible areas, state pomp, and religious ceremonies. Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, made his state entry into Delhi on the occasion in Delhi Durbar (1903) on the back of an elephant leading a procession of elephants. Modern bulk users of elephants are Forest and Tourism Departments of the government, circus parties, loggers, and religious endowments.