

My days with Professor Lahiri Choudhury

Dr. A.J.T.Johnsingh, Nature Conservation Foundation, WWF-India and Corbett Foundation.

“Johnsingh, what do you like to have for lunch tomorrow” asked Prof. Lahiri Choudhury. It was a day in June 2005. I had taken my younger son Mervin Johnsingh from Dehradun to Kolkata to enable him to join Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) and attend their training program there. Although arrangements for his and the other trainees’ stay had been made in the Great Eastern Hotel, I was keen to stay with the Professor and Mrs. Sheela Choudhury for a day, admit my son in the program the next day and then return to Dehradun. I found the June weather in Kolkata extremely hot and sultry, and sweat poured out of every pore in the skin while not in the air-conditioned room.

Hilsa, the tasty fish

My reply to him was, “I would like to eat *hilsa (Tenualosa ilisha)*”, a fish reported to be tasty and much liked by the people of West Bengal. “Johnsingh, I am sorry”, he said. “You have come at the wrong time of the year as this is the period of *Jamai Shashti*, Son-in-law’s Day, and all large and fresh *hilsa* from the market would have already been bought by people who would like to treat their sons-in-law with sumptuous and tasty food”. Nevertheless, that day for lunch he arranged to cook some *hilsa* which I found it to be tasty but very bony ! That evening I acknowledged his hospitality, the taste of the fish curry, and bid goodbye to the Professor and Mrs. Choudhury, left my son in the hotel and returned to Dehradun.

Arunachal Pradesh and Jaldapara

My long-term interaction with Professor Choudhury began in 1982-83, when I was asked to carry out a survey of elephants in Arunachal Pradesh. I had by that time returned from the US after completing my post-doctoral research on raccoons and opossums in Front Royal, a property of the Smithsonian Institution, under the guidance of Dr. John Seidensticker, and had joined the

Bombay Natural History Society to look after their elephant project in south India. Then, Professor Choudhury, who was teaching English at Rabindra Bharati University in Kolkata, had a honorary position as the coordinator of the Asian Elephant Specialist Group of North-east India. As directed by him, I reached Kolkata in late November 1982 to discuss the methodology to survey elephants in Arunachal Pradesh. He made arrangements for my stay in a YMCA hostel with the suggestion that every day I should go to his house for discussion and lunch.



Professor Lahiri Choudhury and Mrs. Sheela Choudhury, 17th March 2012, A.J.T. Johnsingh.

If I remember correctly, I had seven superb meals in his house: mutton, chicken and fish were served, followed by an amazing array of Bengali sweets. Professor Choudhury's mother, who was living with him, was extremely pleased to serve me, and it seems later one day she commented to the Professor that "I like Johnsingh very much because he eats well". The typical benevolent attitude of mothers! I developed a great rapport with his son, Deep Kanta, who was then about 12 years old, and was fond of shooting ducks and horse-riding.

The guidance I received from the Professor about the methodology to survey elephants was simple, and later while in the Arunachal, I realized that his methods were naïve. He arranged a jeep and a driver from Odisha for my four-day journey from Kolkata to Itanagar, with the suggestion that I should start the survey from the western-most part of the Arunachal, which is the West Kameng district. His relationship with the forest officials was so good that for my en-route stay, he arranged for reservations in the forest resthouses, including a stay in Mathanguri in Manas Tiger Reserve. Before reaching the Mathanguri forest resthouse, I met Deb Roy, the dedicated and dynamic field director of the Reserve in his office on Barbetta Road. That was my second meeting with him; my first meeting had been in Bandipur TR when I was doing my research on the dhole in the late 1970s. Knowing about the aggressive behavior of elephants in the Reserve, Deb Roy thoughtfully and correctly suggested that I should take an armed guard with me when I went for a wildlife drive after settling in at Mathanguri forest resthouse for the night.

The local Range Forest officer and a guard, each armed with a rifle, came with me in the jeep, which certainly saved us and the jeep from the intended attack of a young tusker. The bravery shown by the guard that evening was remarkable as he jumped out of the vehicle and fired two shots over the head of the tusker, which was about to gore the vehicle with its tusks. The bullets whistled and flew over a mile or so to fall somewhere in the elephant-grass habitat and the tusker turned around and ran away.

My earlier experience with elephants and elephant habitat was in the Mudumalai-Bandipur landscape, where the foothills of the Western Ghats are not that high, and the vegetation is of thorn-dry and moist deciduous forest. Visibility could be better in such forests. But in Arunachal Pradesh, I found the elephant habitat daunting, with frequent rains, plentiful leeches, high mountains and dense vegetation made impenetrable by bamboo and canes, the latter armed with long tendrils with abundant, small, sharp and curved thorns. Professor Choudhury had said that on every hilltop there would be a trail and one has to simply climb the hill, walk along the trail and count elephants on either side!.

Several days I stayed in Tipi forest resthouse on the bank of Bhareli or Kameng River. Near the resthouse then there was a large *Canarium strictum* tree and sometimes up to 20 great hornbills used to come and sit on the tree to feed on the fruits. Almost every night elephants used to walk through the Tipi orchidarium, downstream of the rest house, to go to the river and may be to cross the river to get into Pakhui Wildlife Sanctuary. One day with the staff I crossed the river in a boat and went into the sanctuary. While walking along with the staff, who were armed with sharp and long knives (*dao*) to ward off the cane tendrils, we almost walked into a tusker which was coming on the same trail from the opposite side. Along the ankle-deep muddy trail we all retreated rapidly and silently, with the cane thorns tearing our shirts and pants, and in the process we stumbled into a large animal, which with a big *whoof* ran into the bush, away from us. The staff said it was a tiger.



Pig-tailed macaque in Khao Yai National Park, March 1996, A.J.T.Johnsingh.

My extraordinary sighting during that trip, while walking along the Chopai River one evening, with ACF A.K. Sen, was a large flock of 334 wreathed hornbills which flew overhead in groups to their roosting sites. Later when I related this event to Dr. Salim Ali, he said that he himself had never seen such

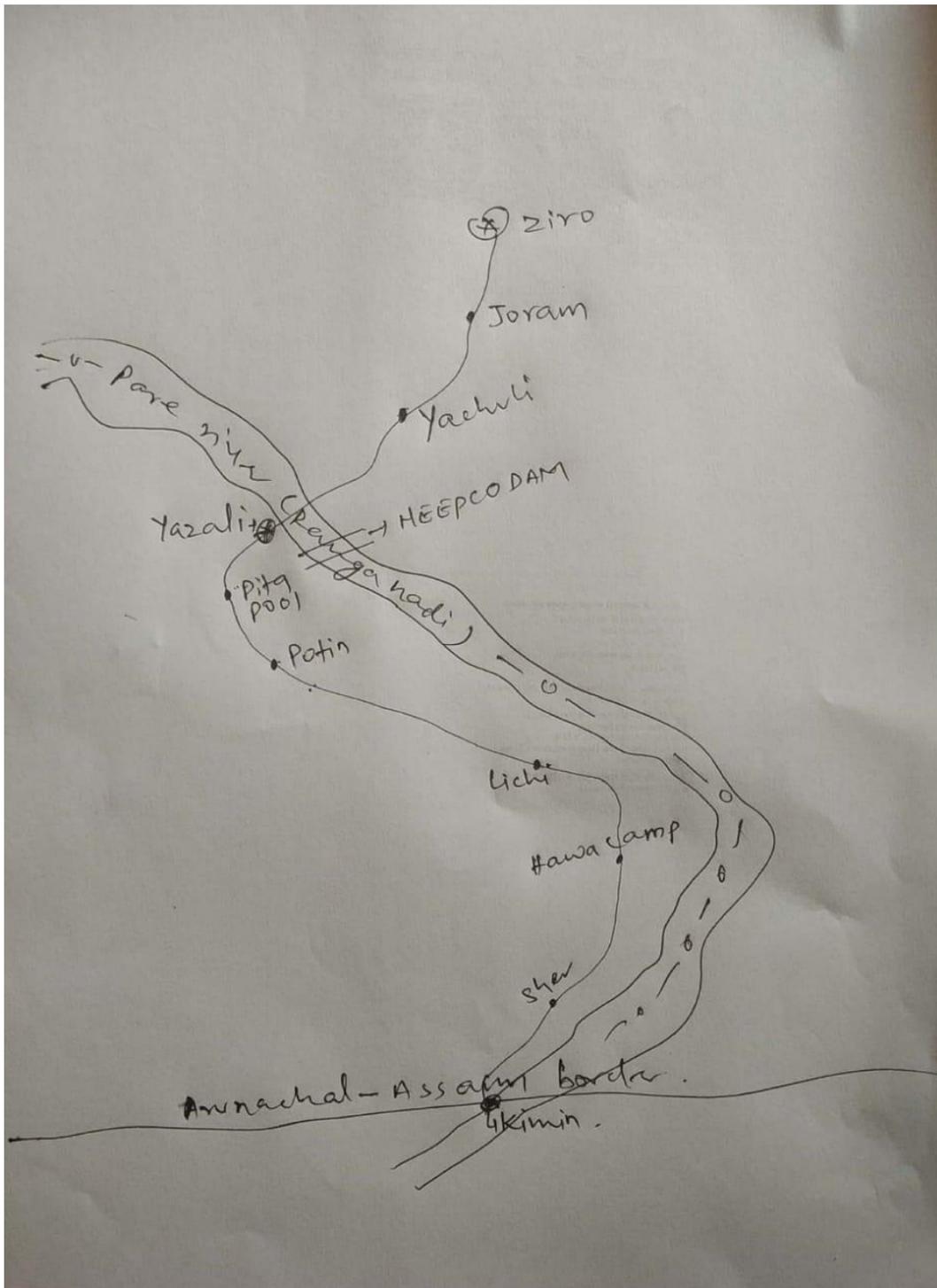
a flock. That evening I also counted nearly 40 great hornbills. Soon I returned to Jaldapara WLS to attend a workshop on captive elephant management where I was deeply impressed by the passionate, some times angry, discussions carried out by the legends of that period: J.C. Daniel, S.P. Shahi, Deb Roy and Professor Lahiri Choudhury. Lalji, Professor's guru, who was known to have captured nearly 1000 elephants by the mela-shikar method, with his curved moustache and woolen cap, attracted more people than the best tusker in the camp. I had also met S.P. Shahi earlier when he visited Bandipur Tiger Reserve on an unsuccessful trip to photograph the dhole.

The workshop was wonderful and extremely valuable as there were 30 elephants or so and all aspects relating to captive and wild elephant management were demonstrated. The participants were given the chance to assess the height of an elephant by measuring the circumference of its forefoot and an attempt was made to find out whether tiger urine can be used to frighten crop-raiding elephants. Drawing circles using chalk on the forehead at the top of the trunk and at the temple, Deb Roy spoke about the vulnerable points in the body of an elephant which need to be hit with bullets if the elephant needs to be eliminated with one shot, and there was a demonstration of the *mela shikar* method by Lalji and his team.

Second visit to Arunachal Pradesh

If December was cold in the Arunachal, January was even colder, and it became dark even around 1600 hrs. In early January, I travelled with the Professor from Lilabari airport to Ziro, a distance of nearly 140 km. Our plan was to stay in Ziro forest resthouse for a few days and understand the elephant habitat around. While approaching Ziro, a boy and a young man came up from the Ranga River which was flowing to the left of the road carrying a 3-kg freshly caught golden mahseer (*Tor putitora*). Water was dripping from the fish which shone beautifully in the morning light. The equipment the young man had used to catch the mahseer was a long bamboo pole with line and hook and a reel. He may have used a small fish as bait. The Professor asked the young man whether the fish could be bought, there was a short bargain and then the fish was purchased for Rs, 20.00. The fishermen

went home happily and we also drove towards the rest house with happy thoughts about the excellent fish curry for lunch and dinner.



Rough sketch map drawn by Tamo Dada showing the locations between Kimin and Ziro

During our visit to Ziro we learnt that the elephant range in that part of Arunachal Pradesh had in the past (in the 1960s) been as broad as 50 km from Kimin to Yazoli. But today, it had shrunk to about 30 km from Kimin to Lichi village. We found that along this route, elephants could have crossed the Ranga River on a bridge three-and-half kilometers from Kimin. Beyond this there were at least four potential crossing points where human settlements or *Terminalia myriocarpa* plantations had blocked passage for large mammals. We also learnt that there were proposals to settle people from the upper reaches in the narrow belt of semi-evergreen forests below; I wonder if it has been carried out. Had it been carried out, by this time (2019) it would have forever destroyed the habitat for elephants and other large mammals.

Khao Yai and the pig-tailed macaque

My travels with the Professor and Dr. R. Sukumar, then co-chair of the Asian Elephant Specialist Group, to Myanmar in March 1996 to attend the meeting of the Asian Elephant Specialist Group, en-route visiting Khao Yai National Park in Thailand, are evergreen in my memory. Sukumar and I met the Professor in Calcutta airport and he looked like a Christmas tree, with several objects – camera, binocular, reading glass and the pouch with his passport and ticket - hanging from his person; he was a sight to behold! We had to look after him as he had the habit of forgetfully leaving things behind.

In Khao Yai we travelled in a car looking for wildlife and, in one place, a young pig-tailed macaque came on to the road as tourists there have the habit of feeding the macaques. I was sitting by the side of one window with my camera in my hand while the Professor was in the middle and Sukumar was near the other window. The macaque came to my side of the road and, out of the window, I extended a piece of sweet-tamarind, which the macaque took and ate. Being near the window with a camera in my hand, I could quickly get two pictures of the macaque. The Professor was very excited to see the macaque but before he could take his camera from his bag, the macaque ran away and climbed a tree to join its group. The Professor was a very disappointed for some time but soon his cheerful nature overcome his disappointment.

Koluchaur and Indian trout

I am happy that I was able to arrange a memorable field trip for him in December 2001 after we both attended the national symposium on elephant conservation in Haridwar convened by S.S. Bist, the then Director, Project Elephant. The Professor was keen on viewing some areas of the Corbett landscape, and so in the company of Tariq Aziz, then working in WWF-India, I took him to Koluchaur, west of Corbett Tiger Reserve in the Lansdowne Forest Division. Koluchaur with a heritage forest bungalow, now being renovated, is a fabulous place for all forms of wildlife of the outer Himalaya, including golden mahseer, king cobra, great hornbill, goral, sambar, elephant, smooth-coated otter, sloth bear, leopard and tiger. The Himalayan black bear comes down to the Koluchaur area in winter. Over the decades, I have gone there numerous times with trainees and students from the Wildlife Institute of India.



Professor Lahiri Choudhury, Deep Kanta and Mrs. Sheela Choudhury, 30th June 2016, A.J.T.Johnsingh.

The 11-km-long road between Saneh and Koluchaur, which crosses the Kolu River several times, gets repaired in December. On reaching Saneh, we requested the staff in the forest rest house to prepare a simple lunch of *dhal*, *chawal* and vegetables for us. We then told them that we would be back in Saneh by around 2 pm, and then we drove to Koluchaur. I had taken my

fishing rod with me, and in one of the pools near the Koluchaur bungalow when I tried for golden mahseer I caught a c. 400-g Indian trout (*Raimas bola*), which we brought to the Saneh forest resthouse and cooked for the Professor. He was very happy as he said that he was eating trout after a long time.

Visiting him in Kolkata

After I retired and settled in Bangalore, I visited him twice. In March 2012 while returning from Namdapha Tiger Reserve, assisted by S.S. Bist who was then serving as Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, General and Head of Forest Protection Force, West Bengal, I met the Professor and Mrs. Choudhury. Although he was suffering from severe back problems, he was healthy, his memory was sharp and we cheerfully discussed various conservation issues. My last meeting with him was on 30th June 2016. I had gone to Kolkata to attend a seminar related to the centenary celebrations of the Zoological Survey of India and, after the seminar, I visited him. This time I was saddened as he looked like shadow of his former self; he was unable to recognize me in spite of Mrs. Choudhury and Deep Kanta prompting his memory. I left his home with a heavy heart.

In the first week of March 2019, S.S. Bist informed me about the death of the Professor and all the events I have described in this article flashed through my mind. I used to joke with him and tease him occasionally and he used to accept it all with a hearty smile. Once he told me that an elephant bull would be always accompanied by a sambar stag and I told him that this observation could be accidental and would not be true always.



*Tamo Dada, 27th Mile, Namdapha Tiger Reserve, 8th March 2018,
A.J.T.Johnsingh.*

Since he grew up with elephants in the former East Pakistan his love and affection for them was boundless. Once, while driving north of Ziro along a narrow mountain road, steep slopes on the left and deep valley to the right, he commented that elephants are very friendly animals. I reminded him that when ill tempered, they can be nasty too. Then on the road we saw a sign which said that in 1962 when a group of seven army personnel were travelling in a truck they had met a bull tusker on the road. I don't know what they did to the elephant but the bull pushed the vehicle off the road into the deep valley and all of them died. The Professor was driving (he was very fond of driving) and pointing at the board on which the above incident had been inscribed, I told him to read and know what his friendly elephant had done to the vehicle and the soldiers. He did not reply and did not speak for some time as he continued to drive.

In my memory, I see him deeply engaged in heated discussions; although good natured, he was well-known for heated arguments, with J.C. Daniel, S. P. Shahi and Deb Roy in Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary , and when I recollect that memory, it brings tears to my eyes. Like the old magnificent bull tuskers of the Periyar landscape, they are all gone, gone forever, never to return, leaving a great void in the elephant conservation community in India.

Postscript

Tamo Dada, an alumnus of Wildlife Institute of India (IXth MSc batch in Wildlife Science), *Nyishi* by birth, now works in Arunachal Civil Service as Circle Officer. He informs me that one group of elephants infrequently comes around Kimin on the Assam border and another group is still seen up in Lower Subansiri district between Yazali and Sagalee but the elephants there get repeatedly harassed by the people and so the status of elephants in Assam-Lower Subansiri landscape is dismal. Mahseer still occurs below Ziro in Yazali where there is a hydroelectric dam on the Ranga River. Local people protect the mahseer from dynamiting and if anybody is found unethically killing the fish by dynamiting or poisoning or by use of electricity he or she is fined.

Acknowledgements:

Help rendered by Madhavi Sethupathi, Elizabeth Johnsingh, Mervin Johnsingh and Tamo Dada in writing this article is kindly acknowledged.