



## THE HISTORICAL NEXUS: AFRICAN AND ASIAN ELEPHANTS IN PROMINENT EMPIRES

Mishab Bin Hamza E

### RESEARCH ARTICLE



**Author Details:** Masters Student,  
Department of History, Ramjas  
College, New Delhi, India

**Corresponding Author:**  
Mishab Bin Hamza E

**DOI:**  
<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.250303011>

### Abstract

This article delves into the intricate connection between African and Asian elephants and their roles within prominent empires, presenting a comprehensive synthesis of scholarly debates. Emphasizing a primary source analysis, this work primarily draws from secondary sources such as Trautman's "Elephants and Kings: An Environmental History" and Sukumar Raman's "The Living Elephants: Evolutionary Ecology, Behaviour, and Conservation." The exploration is particularly focused on the Indian subcontinent, with major reliance on primary sources like Arthashastra and Ain I Akbari to reconstruct historical narratives. The article provides a nuanced understanding of the ancient perceptions surrounding elephants, elucidating their significance as depicted in primary sources. By employing critical analyses and drawing connections between historical contexts, this work aims to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the profound relationship between elephants and the prominent empires that shaped the course of history.

**Keywords:** *Human-Animal Interactions, Elephants in Empire, Environmental History of South Asia, Military Zoology, Symbolic Power of Animals*

### Introduction

The interactions of human with animals in African-Asian subcontinent are not a new diaspora which we have to discuss, rather the association of animal-human cultures are empirically proven by the archaeological evidences from Paleolithic to neolithic and later in Mesolithic as well. Upper Paleolithic people created complex designs out of mammoth tusks. In more recent times, carvings by Asian masters have become an expression of art. The use of ivory as a medium has been celebrated throughout history. Perhaps no one could have predicted that the international traffic in tusks would come to a standstill, jeopardizing the centuries-old ivory culture, a quarter-century ago. Simple ornamentals and figures are derived from the simple ornamentals and figures. During the proto history period (Harappan Civilization) of Indian sub-continent is well inclined with seals and epigraphical sources to establish the association with animals such as elephants and bulls in larger sense. Archaeological findings from Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro clearly shows that the elephants were known to third-century Indians before Christ. As the elephant appears in the signs it is safe to assume that the animal was too important to find a religious and holy character.

The Empires of ancient and medieval times in Indian subcontinent kingdoms exploited and used the natural resources in a great way to sustain their regimes and they have started to monopolize their supply especially in the common ground. "Arthashastra" and "Ain I Akbari" as a primary source for re-establishing the empirical level of Animals have used in the Imperial Courts. According to Trautman the both "Arthashastra" and "Ain I Akbari" can provide immense knowledge about Indian subcontinent's human interactions of elephant.

While going through the "Forest act of 1878" it discloses that British Empire wanted to keep a check on the forest wealth. The background history of the Central India region examines the ideas and beliefs that were inherited in England and their development in a particular context of this study. Here Rangarajan emphasizes the first place where forests originate as a 'desert area' and a vision of progress or achievement policies measured by 'deforestation'. The basic premise of the new governors was to be financially sound and not at all sensitive to local residents who may have been completely excluded or placed in a moral or regulatory framework. According to Rangarajan the changes and shifts, as emphasized, the emerging context prevents any gathering. Conservation efforts. However, by the time the Forest Act of 1878 had one witness a certain consensus regarding forest encroachment. In fact, certain political requirements related to the content of the popular uprising and the need to integrate

colonial existence through communication networks like roads and railways and to keep the records for the account the development .

In the pretext of China, the interstate hostility of the Warring Nations period, followed by the coerced unification of the states, first under the Qin, then the Han, slightly later than the establishment of the Mauryan empire . Elvin argues that within the active manipulation of nature for short term advantages the empires enjoyed a competitive economic and military edge over those who failed to a matter of Darwinian politics and Malthusian processes. Interesting narratives of deforestation, species loss, agricultural growth, and also the institution of irrigation. Elvin follows them tightly centered on environmental histories of 3 localities: Jiaying, simply south of the Yangzi delta; Guizhou province, within the south (originally home to the Miao people); and Zunhua, within the northeast. These native studies show the larger themes of the book at add specific contexts . The story of Guizhou, within which the Miao were step by step unfortunate and replaced by Han dynasty Chinese, is very illuminating. To defeat the Miao, the Chinese had to eliminate Guizhou's forest surroundings and replace it with cultivation. Elvin's sources show that the Chinese conducted this ecological warfare deliberately. 4000 years past. The earlier sacrifice started from the wild elephants which roamed through woodlands that become abundant of China. Until 1662, ones were worked as war elephants in Chinese armies. however nowadays pachyderms survive solely in a very few zoos and, provisionally, in little protected areas in southwestern China. In *Retreat of the Elephants*, Elvin uses this vanishing act as an image for the Brobdingnagian environmental transformations that characterize, and helped to form, Chinese history.

### **Empires and their Interaction with African and Asian Elephants**

Indus valley civilization might be the first civilization to domesticate elephants, but in proto historical evidences are not even deciphered in a proper manner. So, this argument can't be as solid. The Civilizational Excavator such as Mackay argues that "Great attention should be paid on seals for the representation of bristles along the outline of body and head, which is perhaps a mark of a younger animal, for adults generally lose this hair ". The big question, the matter of domestication and taming. The Indus people had a full range of domesticated animals drawn from local wild species, including humped Indian cattle, un humped cattle, water buffaloes, goats and sheep, though not horses. As far as the arguments of Marshall's are concerned a "manger" placed before the elephant in some seals for the representation of a vertical fold or line at the shoulder, it interpreted as harness, or the edge of a blanket-like covering; and decorative painting on a terracotta toy elephant. By looking at each of these closely. As for the manger, Marshall sees an association between the community of Indus valley civilization and wild animals, possibly in captivity

The elephant is a notable passage of the Rig Veda, is called *mṛiga hastin*, the wild animal with a hand, that is, a trunk—recalling the inscription of the Egyptian Amenemhab, which also called the trunk a hand. This shows that the elephant was a novelty to the Vedic Aryans; having no word of their own they made up the descriptive word *hastin*—which, as we noted, survives to this day in Hindi, *hāthi*. *Mrga*, "wild animal," is opposed to *paśu*, "domestic animal" According to Sarva Daman Singh, in his book on warfare in the Vedic period, is singular in departing from the scholarly consensus that the Rigvedic Aryans did not use war elephants. He is very positive about the evidence for the taming of elephants in the Indus civilization prior to the Vedic period. He offers a handful of Rigvedic passages which may be interpreted to imply elephant capture and training, if not warfare; but even he concedes that the chariot was foremost and puts his claim about the war elephant tentatively: "we suggest that the use of the elephant in warfare was not impossible in the Rigvedic period as to modern assumption.

The scattered distribution of elephants in the southern parts of the India or south Asia have been clearly mentioned in the "Manasollasa" text. The concept of (*Gaja-vanas*) eight forest and its extension have also mentioned in the *Manasollasa*. The Mauryan connection with the elephants has been clearly quoted in the works of *Arthashastra* as Trautman Mentioned . The Mughal imperial connection with the exotic animals such as elephants, horses etc., have been mentioned in detailed from "Ain I Akbari", according to Irfan Habib, he mapped it in the work called "An Atlas of the Mughal Empire ".

Historian D.D. Kosambi and archaeologist D.P. Agrawal improved the view that the Ganga valley was heavily forested, and secondly urbanization was achieved when Bihar iron deposits were exploited: metal was used to make tools for which it was made forests were cleared and agricultural fields built in their area. This version of forest history changed dramatically the work of Makkhan Lal and George Erdosy. Armandi in his "Histoire militaire des éléphants" argues that in the kingdoms of India and the Southeast Asia the number of elephants owned by the king was the clear exposition of his own wealth and power. He also says that's all kings were able to capture wild elephants in their tens or hundreds at a time. European travelers such as Megasthenes the Seleucia's Nicators ambassador to the Mauryan Court also noted such matters.

The distribution of elephants and their incorporation to the empire in Southeast Asian empires called "It is Indianized," and it influenced ancient military practice western peoples, including Persians, Hellenistic empires in Syria and Egypt, and Greeks, Carthaginians, Numidians, and the Romans. For thousands of years, from about 1000 BCE to in the nineteenth century, this development took over the minds of the Indians military elephant and as far away as Spain and Java. While tracking back to the connection with empires if exclusively with elephants, its for military purpose as well as the processions in the public to build an image of Royal.

According to Trautman the fodder for elephant keeping them captive and nurturing their offspring is time consuming and is not an economically viable. So, the elephants were kept in the forests for up to twenty years to train them in proper way. He wants to make it clear that he does not argue for historic kingship in general, or Indian kingship specifically, being intrinsically “green.” Indeed, the strength of kingship to mobilize people and resources located an elevated strain at the environment, as we see from the luxurious trade in pearls, coral, furs, and pelts, and the trade in animal elements for medicinal purposes .

According to the Ain i Abkari, “Elephant drivers have a drug which reasons a synthetic heat; however, it frequently endangers the life of the beast. The noise of warfare makes a few advanced elephants simply as fierce as on the rutting season; even an unexpected begin might also additionally have such an effect. Thus, His Majesty’s elephant Gajmuktah; he receives brisk, as quickly as he hears the sound of the Imperial drum, and receives the above mentioned as temporal discharge. According to Maccabees, the Hellenistic rulers of Syria gave their elephants wine the juice of grapes and mulberries before battle, doubtless continuing Indian practice. Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang, who wrote a memoir of his visit to India to collect copies of the scriptures, says that king Pulakeśin of Maharaṣṭra had several hundred special warriors, and several hundred violent elephants.

Elephants are most prominent according to ‘Ain I Akbari’ in the Mughal court, the reason for that Akbar was deeply interested in them. Hundreds of elephants were reserved only for the king. Akbar himself took the place of caregiver, that is, sat on the neck instead on the shoulders or behind the driver: “Sir, the rider of the king of the plains of beauty, riding on all of them a species of elephant, from the first to the last, to make, however their power is almost supernatural, obedient his command. His Majesty will put his foot in the police, too they ride, and when they are in the period of constipation, they are astonished knowledgeable people .

Buddhist, Jain and Brahmanical sources are paramount as far as the Magadha and Nanda dynasty are concerned, Magadha in the low-central village of Ganga, having four times as many complete armies. The Greek and Latin historians of Alexander of Macedon corroborate this in their record of a report that the Nanda king of Magadha had an army of 200,000 foot, 20,000 horse, 2,000 chariots, and 4,000 elephants. Megasthenes ’ memoir of his embassy, shortly after, to the court of the Mauryan king of Magadha, Candragupta, gives a description of military organization that includes the four caturaṅga divisions, plus two others connected with army supplies, oxcarts, and river boats. So, we cannot doubt that the fourfold army was a living institution of actual armies.

Achaemenid empire of Persia c. 550–330 BCE, as the largest of the kind. That the world has seen to its time, must acquire an inspiration for the formation of the Nanda and Maurya empires through the natural resources, even if there are few direct connections in surviving records, the evidence being circumstantial and few. One such connection is the inclusion of a province of India called Gandara and of Hinduś or indus in the empire of Darius I, as we know from his inscriptions and the account of Herodotus. There were Indian units in the Achaemenid army. In the reliefs at Persepolis there is a parade of different national types bringing tribute, and we could hope to find elephants there. Ctesias wrote accounts of Persia the Persika and India the Indika. He was the first Greek, and indeed the first non-Indian, to write about the Indian war elephant. Because of his writings Greeks became aware of the Indian war elephant long before Alexander encountered the living thing. At Babylon Ctesias had seen with his own eyes an elephant overturns a palm tree at the command of its Indian mahout. Ctesias’ Persika starts with six books on the history of Assyria prior to the founding of the Persian empire.

During the time of Alexander would have known something about elephants from his tutor Aristotle, who had written a good account of elephant physiology based in part on the works of Ctesias. Possibly Alexander was familiar with Ctesias’ Persika, with its imaginative account of Indian war elephants. At the battle of Gaugamela, the quickness of the Macedonian attack appears to have prevented the Persians from properly deploying their elephants and those of their Indian allies, rendering them ineffective . This made an easy introduction to the actual Indian war elephant for Alexander, who seized the elephants of the enemy at Gaugamela, and doubtless their drivers and keepers as well . Sudden death of Alexander created a vacuum in the succession of the Alexander’s Empire. Inside the court power struggle has taken place for the succession. short-term alliances among a dozen or so major players called the Successors diadochoi , for whom the royal family of Alexander.

Syria and Egypt came under two of Alexander’s generals: Seleucus, who had commanded the infantry that faced the elephants of Porus at the battle of the Jhelum; and Ptolemy, a commander of cavalry. Macedonia went to Antipater. Elephants played a prominent role in the wars of the successors and continued being used in the ensuing period, above all during the rivalry of the Seleucid kings of Syria with the Ptolemies of Egypt. Pier Armandi, in his “Histoire militaire des éléphants” (1843), found that most aspects of the art of war among the ancients were well served by the scholarship of his day, but not the use of war elephants. Scullard, a classicist, surveyed this territory anew; his “The elephant in the Greek and Roman world” (1974) has become the standard work. It is not a military history, but it includes descriptions of many battles using elephants, as well as non-military aspects of elephant use. Once the Ptolemies brought African elephants head-to-head with Asian ones in battles with the Seleucids, the differences between them became apparent. Contrary to what we expect, the Hellenistic sources regularly say that the Asian elephant was larger and stronger than the African. Polybius described the battle of Raphia, in the Fourth Syrian war, fought between Ptolemy V Philopater and Antiochus III in 217 BCE, to which Ptolemy brought 73 elephants and Antiochus 102. As according to Gower in his article the difference between African and Asian elephant become vivid and clear that even in African elephant there are two species or varieties of African elephant one is savanna elephant and forest elephant.

By the time of Parthian or Arsacid empire, the interaction to the elephant is discontinuous. To the east of Iran, according to al-Adli of Baghdad, in his treatise on chess, praised the Indians for three original contributions to the world: the game of chess, the animal fables of the Kalila wa Dimna collection from the Sanskrit collection called Pañcatantra, and the place-notation of numbers using zero as a place-holder. These passed from India through Sassanian Persia to the Arabs on their way to worldwide spread. The Sassanians have left distinct traces of this movement, in a romance on the introduction of chess through diplomatic exchange between an Indian king Devaśarma and the Sassanian king, and the Pahlavi text of the Kalila wa Dimna. All this indicates a closer connection of India and Iran, and of greater king-to-king communication and exchange. With this diplomatic traffic, we must suppose, there was a flow of war elephants from the kings of India to the Sassanian kings of Iran. This is the larger context of Sassanian military use of elephants, which has been ably surveyed and analyzed by Philip Rance 2003 and Michael Charles 2007.

Turkish rulers who established themselves in Ghazna, in Afghanistan, who used the treasure and the war elephants they acquired through their wars in India as resources against their Central Asian Turkish enemies. The Ghaznavids sought out war elephants from India and took them in tribute or as spoils of war. According to Bosworth 350CE from Kanauj, 185 from Mahaban in 1018–19CE and 580 from Raja Ganda the following year. The Thanesar expedition of 1014–15 was undertaken because of the desire of sultan Mahmud for the special breed of sailamani elephants evidently the mountain-going or giri-cara elephants of the Himalayas or Vindhya's, judging by the name, which means "of the mountains"; and "on another occasion the Sultan so coveted an elephant of proverbial excellence belonging to Chandar Ray, ruler of Sharma, that he offered fifty ordinary ones in exchange. The numbers of elephants in the Ghaznavid army, therefore, would have been substantial. Sultan Mahmūd reviewed 1,300 on one occasion, 1,679 on another. At the capital, Ghazna, the pilkhana or elephant stable had provision for 1,000, with a staff of Indians under an overseer of the elephant stable, muqaddam-i-pilbanan .

### Conclusion

In this research article I have tried to focus mostly on the debates of various scholarly works especially from the Trautman's "Elephants and Kings an environmental History " book as a secondary source. Indus valley civilization might be the first civilization to domesticate elephants, but in proto historical evidences are not even deciphered in a proper manner. While reconstruction the major sources which the historians and civilizational excavators such as Mackay and Marshall were argued on the specific understanding on archaeological such as Seals and its discretional analysis basis. Rigvedic times as Singh argued its for chariot and processional need, the usage of war elephant perspective is only a coincidental factor.

The primary sources for reconstructing this specific topic in Indian empires such as Mauryan and Mughal empires Arthashastra and Ain I Akbari respectively as a great source, has Trautman tried to discuss in his work. These sources have a great number of details in respect with war elephant and their maintenances in particular even in these texts have the scientific and behavioral knowledge. African and Asian elephant have impressive differences in their physiology itself but in the ancient times to rediscover such matters as not as much possible in the modern times. So, the understanding had little bit difference of the size and physiology related perspective, During the times of Achaemenid, Assyrian, Alaxender. But during Selucues and Ptolomy it had been re understood it, by placing the two different species in the same place for War.

Later the empire such as Gaznavids , Parthians, Sassanians they had a great authentic source to acquire such elephants to their courts, Ctesias Persika and indika played a great role to connect such sources in detail. Even though the Parthians had a sought of Discontinuity in elephantry and its knowledge. By the time of alexander and Seluecus the complete idea was spread even in the Greek, Rome and later into the Carthagians. According to Mark Elvin the Chinese notion of Elephant was also in respect with Qin and Han dynasty they have tried to incorporate elephants into their army but Elvin makes his argument that the forest cover has been destroyed to earn temporary development of their area it caused massive "deforestation" and "desertification". While it caused complete alienation of the place for elephants and flora and fauna .

**Acknowledgment:** No

**Author's Contribution:** Mishab Bin Hamza E: Methodology, Analysis, Data Collection, Literature Review, Drafting, Referencing

**Funding:** No

**Declaration:** Not Applicable

**Competing Interest:** No

### References:

1. Bossworth, C. E. (1963). The Ghaznavids: Their Empire in Afghanistan and Eastern Iran; 994-1040. Edinberg: Edinberg University Press.
2. Elvin, M. (2004). The Retreat of the Elephants. New Haven: Yale University Press.
3. India, Governor General of. 1878. India Forest Act of 1878. Culcutta: British India.

4. Jarrett, H. S. (1891). The Ain I Akbari." In Ain I Akbari, by Abul Fazal Allami, Vol 2, 176-179. Culcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, Baptist Mission Press.
5. Kosambi, D. D. (1956). An introduction to the study of Indian history. Bombay: Popular Book Depot.
6. Nicholas. (2008). The Complete Fragments Of Ctesias Of Cnidus: Translation And Commentary With An Introduction." A Dissertation Presented To The Graduate School, University of Florida, 116.
7. Pati, B. (1997). "Fencing the Forest: Conservation and Ecological Change in India's Central Provinces 1860-1914 by Mahesh Rangarajan." Impact of Capitalism on the Forests of Central India Vol 11/12, Nov-Dec: 75-77.
8. Rangarajan, L. N. (1987). "The Arthashastra." In Arthashastra, by Kautilya, 688-691. New Delhi: Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd.
9. Shrikondekar, G. K. (1939). "Manasollasa." By Someshwara III. Bombay: Bombay Vaibhav Press.
10. Sinha B. P. (1955). "Elephants in ancient Indian army." Indian History Congress, 51-57.
11. Sukumar, R. (2003). The living elephants: evolutionary ecology, behaviour, and conservation. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
12. Tanwar, S. (2016). A study of Indus Script. New Delhi: Paragon International.
13. Trautman, T. (2015). Elephants and Kings, An Environmental History. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
14. Walker, J. F. (2009). Ivory's Ghosts: the White Gold of History and the Fate of Elephants. New York: Grove Atlantic.

#### **Publisher's Note**

*The Social Science Review A Multidisciplinary Journal* remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published data, map and institutional affiliations.

#### **©The Author(s) 2025. Open Access.**

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>