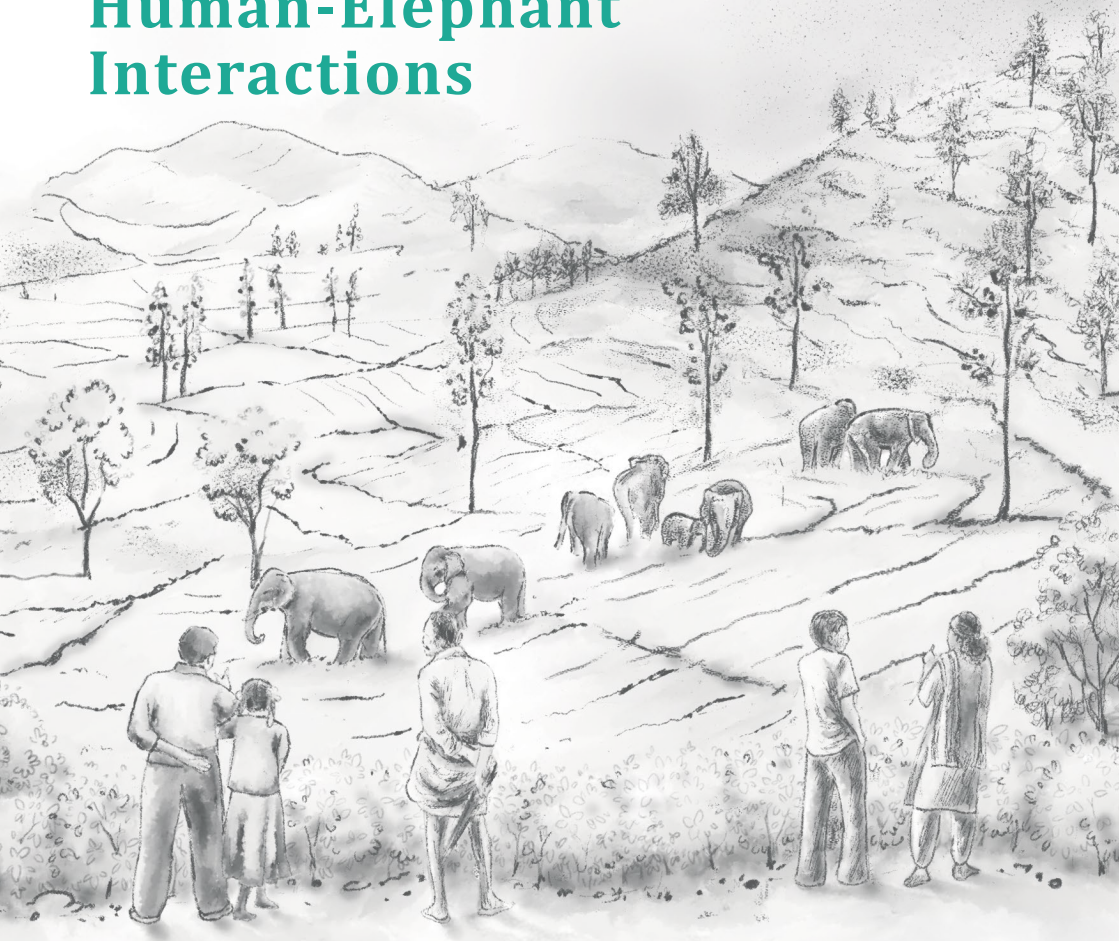
Azim Premji University

Tinkering with Care in Human-Elephant Interactions



Madhuri Ramesh and Vignesh Soundararaj

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Preface

In this book, we describe how care work (also known as affective labour) plays a vital role in fostering the coexistence between humans and wildlife, in inhabited landscapes. We focus on the specific case of a human-elephant conflict mitigation programme anchored by a non-governmental organisation, the Nature Conservation Foundation, in the Valparai plateau in southern India.

We believe this story, of conservation through the lens of care work, is an important one to tell for several reasons: the first is that it adds depth to our current understanding of what conservation practices are required to build a state of coexistence and identify which of these is unique to a certain context versus which might be applicable elsewhere. Secondly, it offers some indication of the type of training and support conservation practitioners will need to address the growing environmental challenge of managing human-wildlife interactions in inhabited landscapes. Moreover, we believe the larger question of how to live ethically with others, human and nonhuman, is one of the pressing issues of our times that requires thoughtful public discussion and collaborative problem-solving. Therefore, we have tried to keep our writing accessible to a wide readership and to convey some of the flavour and complexity of working towards coexistence, we have composed a polyvocal text. By this we mean that we have tried to represent different, and sometimes divergent perspectives by quoting extensively from our field interviews alongside our own analysis. Finally, we hope to entice student readers in particular to engage with the conservation social sciences, hence we have also mentioned some of the extensive scholarship that has informed our research.

Our study was possible due to the support extended by the following: We thank M. Ananda Kumar for his invitation to delve into the Elephant Programme in Valparai and his team, Chitra, Ganesh, Prakash and Sathish for their open responses and assistance; Divya Mudappa and T. R. Shankar Raman for their generous hospitality and help with logistics and P. Jeganathan for urging us to write for a wide audience. We thank the Tamil Nadu Forest Department as well as all the estate managers we approached for their interest and permission to interview their respective staff. We also thank Oviya Jayashima for her assistance with the fieldwork, including interviews with NCF members and estate workers. Most of all, we are grateful to the residents of Valparai for taking the time to share their stories.

Discussions with colleagues in the Azim Premji University, Nature Conservation Foundation and the Coexistence Consortium helped us clarify our ideas. Further, Arima Mishra provided us with some key references in healthcare studies, Sagarika Phalke conducted a valuable workshop on how to interview people about conservation-related conflict, and the following colleagues spared time to provide helpful comments on various chapters: Ananya Banerjee, Amalendu Jyotishi, Anuradha Nagaraj, Revati Pandya and S.V. Srinivas.

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01 Introduction

We were in Valparai, sipping chai and looking at the tea-covered slopes below, when Anand said with conviction,"For people to *believe* in coexistence, conservationists have to *work* to remove that fear. And it is never a complete absence of fear ... fear of the known cannot be removed. Fear of the unknown can be removed or at least managed to a great extent." M. Ananda Kumar is a scientist with the Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF) and he was reflecting on almost twenty years of experience in mitigating conflict between people and elephants in this landscape. Here, elephants walk through human settlements during their seasonal migrations or enter homes and ration shops in search of food, just as often as people enter patches of forest to collect fuelwood, water or take a shortcut from one place to another. Like many other parts of India, this is not a landscape where people and wildlife lead neatly compartmentalised lives. Moreover, Anand believes that although both have an equal right to inhabit the landscape, people's fears about living close to wildlife need to be taken seriously. Therefore, he was emphasising that if conservationists want to promote the idea of coexistence, they must actively work with local communities to assuage their fears and create a network of practical support (to reduce the "fear of the unknown"). At the same time, he believes that conservationists need to have the humility to accept that an element of fear and risk will always remain because animal behaviour is complex and never entirely predictable (the "fear of the known").

This book tells the story of the collective work that a diverse group of people are doing, to address such fears and foster the coexistence of humans and Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*) in Valparai in southern India. It describes the efforts and perspectives of Anand's own team as well as of estate workers, plantation companies, the Forest Department and many others.

Conservation as care work

While human-wildlife coexistence is often spoken about as an emerging challenge, it is useful to take a step back and dip into the work of the philosopher Mary Midgley who wrote extensively about human-animal relations. She coined the term 'mixed community' to highlight how human and nonhuman lives have been entangled since the evolution of *Homo sapiens*. Her works remind us that it is impossible to understand human history, culture, food, clothing or companionship without some reference to nonhumans. Further, Midgley argued that since we are fundamentally social animals, we need to feel connected to human *and* nonhuman others in order to enrich our sense of self and lead *meaningful* lives (McElwain 2020). In other words, she recognised the importance

of *interspecies* sociality. She appears to echo the sentiments of many indigenous communities who have always believed that nonhumans are kin and that humanity cannot flourish without maintaining reciprocal relations of care with nonhumans: Examples from India include the Thakkers, Mahaedo Koli and Warli communities with leopards (Ghosal and Kjosavik 2015; Nair et al 2021), Mishmi with tigers (Aiyadurai 2016), Soléga with tigers and other mammals (Agnihotri et al 2021) and Kattunayakan with large mammals (Jolly et al 2022). Building on these perspectives, we could say that coexistence projects in general are efforts to construct such mixed communities (in the specific case of Valparai, a mixed community of humans and elephants). This requires both *careful* and *caring* work on the part of present-day conservationists because of the inherent risks of sharing space with wildlife and secondly, because conservation has a long, ignoble history of protecting wildlife at the expense of people. But what exactly does 'care work' mean in the context of coexistence and how can it be studied?

In anthropology, 'care work' is also termed affective labour because it is the work done to evoke or manage emotions and build, repair or maintain relations. (Affect is the feelings or emotions we experience in the presence of another being; Singh 2013). It is not about being sentimental or romantic. Instead, it involves elements of expert knowledge, specialised skills, use of technological, legal or financial tools. The feminist scholars Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto describe care work as "a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible. The world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web" (Fisher and Tronto 1990; pg 40). They go on to explain that such a definition of care, with its commitment to the wellbeing of the other, bridges what are commonly imagined as contrasting aspects or binary divisions of the world such as public and private, rights and duties or even love and labour (ibid; pg 49). Drawing from Mary Midgley, we could add that care work in coexistence projects seeks to bridge the divide between humans and nonhumans as well.

Acts of tinkering

Other scholars who have studied care-giving across different sites such as homes, farms and clinics (Mol et al 2010) have found that focusing on care as a set of practices helps us recognise the essential role it plays in improving human and nonhuman lives. Moreover, these scholars point out that what we may categorise as either good or deficient care depends on the context, as well as the larger values that inform our

expectations. Consequently, good care—unlike good management—is not identifiable purely by the outcomes because they may often be mixed or uncertain. Instead, we need to pay attention to the *process* of caregiving. Good care, they say, involves "persistent tinkering in a world full of complex ambivalence and shifting tensions" (Mol et al 2010; pg 14). In fact, other studies of care (de la Bellacasa 2012) acknowledge that even the experience of care-giving may not be uniformly rewarding or pleasant because there may be instances of dissent and conflict between the givers and recipients of care. However, the main goal of these studies has been to understand what vulnerabilities exist and how these can be addressed by building new social relations.

The framing of care as acts of tinkering to address vulnerabilities is particularly apt when we consider human-elephant coexistence projects, because both are intelligent, adaptable species who are nevertheless vulnerable to each other's (mis)behaviours. In the case of elephants in particular, their intelligence helps them overcome human-made barriers such as trenches, barricades and electrified fences. Further, elephants can modify their own behaviour and social relations based on *their* interpretation of human behaviour, memories of the landscape and past experiences (for example: Mumby and Plotnik 2018 and references therein). Humans, on the other hand, are equally capable of reacting strongly based on their interpretation of elephant behaviour and past experiences (for example: Jadhav and Barua 2012; Gogoi 2018; Oommen 2019; Keil 2025). Moreover, both species are capable of inflicting grievous harm or even killing each other in extreme situations or suffering when they witness the injury or death of other members of their species (for more on elephant sociality, for example, see Locke 2017; Douglas-Hamilton et al 2020; Pardo et al 2024; Bates et al 2025). Therefore, it is not hard to imagine how one negative encounter can trigger a chain of mutually hostile reactions that affect both sides. Therefore, when the goal is to facilitate coexistence, it becomes essential for conservationists to pay close attention to the needs of both elephants and humans, manage the emotions of both sides and promote changes in behaviour that are considerate of the other i.e., build a form of interspecies sociality.

Engaged research

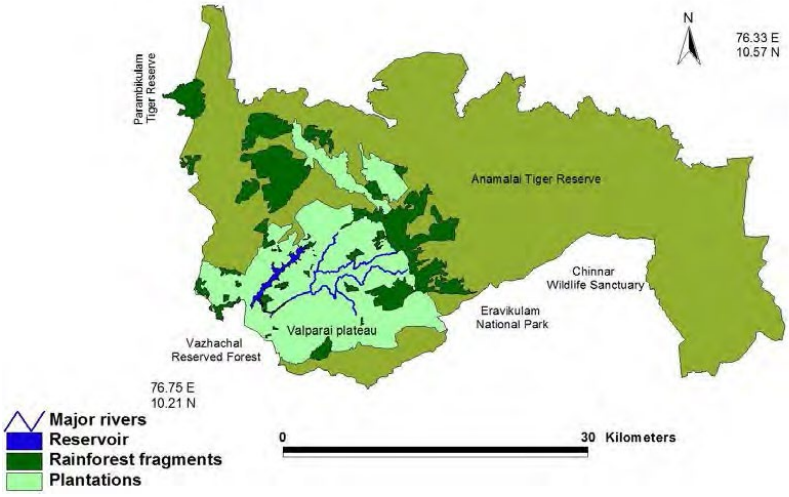
This book is based on research that we undertook in Valparai over a span of ten months (from December 2024 to September 2025). One of us (Madhuri) had known Anand since 2001 and our periodic conversations on participatory conservation as well as the presence of wildlife in inhabited landscapes eventually led to this study of NCF's intervention from an anthropological perspective. Therefore, our entry into Valparai

was built on years of cordial conversations, tacit knowledge and a keen interest in human-animal interactions. Overall, consistent with the ethos of care, we undertook this study in the spirit of concerned allies (Tronto 1998; de la Bellacasa 2012)—rather than detached critics—of conservation. We leave it to our readers to gauge for themselves if our positionality has added depth or distortion to our analysis.

The context

The Valparai plateau is a part of the southern Western Ghats. It is 220 sq km in area and inhabited by over 70,000 people, many of whom work in the large tea or coffee plantations there - the 'estates' as they are locally known. The plateau is surrounded by the extensive natural vegetation of the Anamalai and Parambikulam Tiger Reserves, the Eravikulam National Park and the Vazhachal Reserved Forest. According to NCF's estimates, around 120 Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*) criss-cross the plateau as they move from one Protected Area to another - they form one of the largest populations in Asia. These elephants also use the 40-odd forest fragments that are dispersed across the plantation areas (Kumar and Raghunathan 2019; Figure 1). At first glance, the numbers may not seem impressive: If people and elephants were evenly distributed across Valparai, we could probably expect to see over 600 people and a single elephant for every 2 sq km of area we traversed.

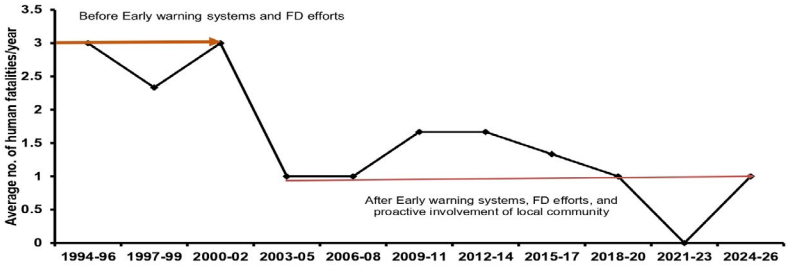
Figure 1. Map of the Valparai plateau, Source: Kumar and Raghunathan 2019.



However, in reality, people and elephants tend to use the same paths and gather in the same valleys and hillsides. Moreover, elephant movement increases significantly after the monsoons, between October and March, and therefore reports of human-elephant encounters also increase around then. Negative encounters result in human injury and occasionally, death of the person. There may also be damage to property when elephants raid homes, noon-meal centres and ration shops, in search of food such as rice, lentils, sugar, fruit, etc (Kumar and Raghunathan 2019).

Anand initiated NCF's conflict mitigation programme in 2006 (Figure 2) but his interest in elephants began in 2002. One of his mentors at the time, Professor Mewa Singh of Mysore University, was interested in exploring the connections between animal psychology and behaviour, and the individual personalities of animals. Extensive discussions with him drew Anand to the study of sociality and behaviour in species such as macaques and elephants. Consequently, for his PhD in Psychology, Anand studied the behavioural adaptations of elephants in inhabited landscapes (the Valparai plateau). He brought some aspects of his earlier primatology training into this study - specifically a keen interest in the individual personalities of elephants and the practice of naming individuals rather than using alphanumeric labels. The naming protocol he followed (which continues even today) is that the names were not normatively-laden (such as 'Rogue' or 'Pacifier') and related elephants were given names that started with the same letter so that family trees could be mapped even when herds split or fuse (for example: the members of the S herd are named Sylvia, Sylvester and so on, whereas the Pigtail herd are named Prakash, Ponni, Padma, etc).

Figure 2. Human mortality due to encounters with elephants in Valparai, over a thirty-year period. Source: M. Ananda Kumar, NCF.



However, by the time he completed this work, Anand felt a sense of dissatisfaction because although the study yielded fascinating insights into the social life of elephants, their conflicts with humans were on the

rise. The elephants were getting chased from place to place while people were getting injured and scared - it left him wondering about what could be done to improve the situation. As he frankly reflected aloud, "You do your PhD and you get your degree, yeah? But does it have any meaning? [...] Most often what happens in the scientific community is that we always give suggestions and recommendations. But we are not sure if those suggestions and recommendations can actually be translated into on-ground things." His informal interactions with the people of Valparai had also sensitised him to the difficulties faced by the estate workers, who were a group that frequently encountered wildlife: "I really appreciate people in Valparai because they have to deal with elephants, they have to deal with sloth bears, with leopards, and gaur. Over and above their family problems, and over and above their [estate] management problems. [...] A single person has to deal with multiple species and multiple situations. [On top of that] elephant guys (conservationists) will go there and say "Oh you have to live like this." And leopard guys will go and say "No, no you have to live like that." How can you expect so many changes and adaptations in a single person?"

Meanwhile, Anand's colleagues Divya Mudappa and T. R. Shankar Raman who were working to restore rainforest fragments within estates, had also been approached by estate managers who wanted help in managing 'the elephant problem'. The three of them designed the conflict mitigation programme that Anand piloted in 2006. The focus of NCF's Elephant Programme continues to be on human-elephant encounters within the tea estates but since 2014, it has been complemented by the efforts of the Anti-Depredation Squad (ADS) of the Tamil Nadu Forest Department, which works across the entire plateau. From the beginning, Anand felt that it was essential to work *with* the local residents rather than flood them with instructions on what they should do. As he stated then (and has continued to repeat at frequent intervals), he was committed to working for people *and* wildlife. He was joined by Ganesh Raghunathan around 2015 and soon after, Ganesh became the face of the programme while Anand took on an advisory role and redirected his energies to addressing human-elephant conflicts in Hassan, Karnataka.

The methods

Our methods included some periods of participant observation with conservationists but we relied mainly on engaged listening - we conducted extensive open-ended interviews with key conservation actors (sometimes multiple times) and semi-structured interviews with residents of Valparai, both those associated with the estates and others (an approximate indicator of sample size is given in Table 1). A

few interviews were also conducted in NCF's headquarters in Mysuru and via video calls. We obtained free, prior informed verbal or written consent from all our respondents and the interviews were conducted in a language that the respondent was comfortable in - either Tamil, Malayalam, English or Hindi. (For example, many of the estate workers who were from the region preferred Tamil while others who had migrated from Jharkhand or Assam preferred Hindi.) We either recorded the interviews and transcribed them (after translation into English) or took extensive running notes. We also maintained field notes which contained descriptions of settings, people, events, summaries of informal conversations and phone calls that seemed relevant, our own reflections, etc. The quotes used in this book are drawn from such notes and have been lightly edited for clarity. Some of our respondents requested confidentiality hence we have created composite characters out of similar respondents, or altered their names and identifying details.

Table 1: Approximate number of respondents interviewed across different occupations

Category of respondent	No. of respondents
Bus/cab/bike drivers	5
Tea pluckers (Tamil/Malayalam-speaking women)	12
Tea pluckers (Hindi-speaking women)	4
Estate managers and supervisors	5
Forest Department staff	8
NCF Elephant Programme team (one woman)	6
Other residents (tea shop owners, retired workers, homestay owners, etc)	12

We 'listened' to what was said in text too by analysing various documents written by the conservationists and our email exchanges with them. Throughout the study, we met online once a week (since Madhuri could spend only limited time in the field) to discuss our notes and evolving analyses. We used inductive coding to analyse our data, following which we began writing this book - altogether this phase spanned around 10 months. In keeping with the collaborative spirit of the study, we shared our draft with Anand and refined the text in response to his comments. However, this is *our* story of the elephant programme and a product of

our limited engagement and knowledge, rather than being *the* story of the elephant programme.

Some methodological challenges

To begin with, our NCF colleagues were somewhat confused by our approach - they imagined this study as an evaluation and hence tried to maintain what they felt was a proper distance from us, the evaluators. We, on the other hand, wanted to spend time with them to build rapport, participate in their everyday work and listen to their personal journeys, as befits qualitative researchers. This confusion arose due to the different research paradigms we were working within - they were most familiar with positivist studies (although they do work with local communities) whereas we were taking an interpretivist approach. Further, we wanted to understand how care practices can facilitate coexistence in general, rather than NCF's programme per se, although the two are of course connected.

Some of these confusions abated with further discussion but others remained. Looking back, it is clear that we should have set aside much more time to discuss our approach but at that point, we jumped right into fieldwork without sufficiently bridging this gap. As a result, we could not carry out extensive participant observation but instead, we conducted our study with an 'ethnographic sensibility'. By this we mean, a cultivated interest that helped us be attentive to the lived experiences of a group of people—what they said, how they worked and how they made sense of the world—in order to acquire a deeper understanding of what animated them (McGranahan 2018).

A second complicating factor is that elephants are of course a wild, protected species and one cannot follow them without appropriate training and the necessary permits. For Vignesh, who led the fieldwork, this 'distant perspective' was a dramatically different experience as compared to his previous work where he had studied human interactions with domesticated nonhumans (Pulikulam cattle; Soundararaj 2023). Therefore, one of the key challenges he faced in this study was how to conceptualise an 'interaction' when there is no scope for intimate acts of care, or even physical proximity to the nonhumans of interest. At first, the idea of 'care from a distance' seemed like an oxymoron.

The frontline Forest Department staff, i.e., the Anti-Depredation Squad (ADS), were also perplexed by Vignesh's approach - they assumed he was there to watch elephants, like most researchers did. Therefore, after pointing out the location of the herd they were tracking, they would move away and stay silent. But of course, he kept trying to talk to them instead.

To add to their confusion, he did not even carry a notebook sometimes, leave alone a camera or binoculars. He had to repeatedly explain why he was interested in people's perspectives before they felt comfortable enough to share their views. Another point we would like to highlight is that the field staff did not have fixed routines: they would suddenly be re-assigned to other tasks such as checking on a water source, completing some paperwork, or chivvying the lion-tailed macaques out of someone's garden. It took us some time to identify which tasks were relevant for us to document and understand.

Similar to the ADS, many residents of Valparai (especially the Tamil and Malayalam speakers) were confused by our approach because they are habituated to the ways of wildlife researchers and have participated in numerous conservation surveys or awareness programmes. Therefore, they expected us to collect quantitative data rather than have long, seemingly general conversations with them; we were frequently re-directed to a person who might possess 'the right information' on how much property was damaged or the amount of compensation received. Initially, even when we did manage to conduct interviews, the responses sounded almost scripted because most residents mentioned only the intelligence of elephants and the importance of coexistence. The 'flatness' of these conversations was jarring: be it an estate supervisor, cab driver or tea shop owner, almost everyone sounded exactly like a conservationist. However, after considerable effort, people became quite voluble and we began to hear the mundane details, lighter experiences and casual thoughts that sprinkle everyday conversations.

But the migrant tea-pluckers (who were mainly from Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Assam and West Bengal) remained extremely reticent, especially the women. Despite Oviya's repeated visits to their houses or to the shops they frequented in the town, she was not able to conduct in-depth interviews. This is an unfortunate gap in our fieldwork because many of the recent negative encounters with wildlife have been reported from this group. Moreover, since the field teams of neither NCF nor the Forest Department spoke Hindi themselves, they were also keen to understand the challenges of this group and this needs to be taken up in the future.

Structure of the book

As is often the case with fieldwork, we gathered many more interesting accounts and observations of human-elephant interactions in Valparai than we anticipated. But to tell a coherent and concise story, we had to make some hard decisions about which sections of this material to

include in this book and which to set aside for a later writing exercise. Based on some discussion with our colleagues, we have structured this book as follows:

After this introduction, in Chapter 2 we provide a description of the landscape and the inhabitants through the eyes of historical figures such as British hunters and surveyors as well as Tamil novelists. This helps us recognise how some elements of the landscape, such as the crisscrossing paths of elephants and people, have remained unchanged even as Valparai was transformed from a forest frontier region to a densely inhabited enclave of plantations. The subsequent chapters are based on our fieldwork: In Chapter 3, we begin with an exploration of the theme of 'fear' and how it mediates interspecies sociality while in Chapter 4 we describe the mutual curiosity between elephants and people and the many acts of tinkering both engage in, to avoid conflict. Chapter 5 takes a closer look at the range and intensity of affects even a single elephant personality might evoke - in this case, the well-known Monica, a matriarch of the Korangumudi area. Chapter 6 traces the everyday work of the ADS team, their experiences and perspectives on bridging the nature-culture binary by caring for elephants *and* people. In Chapter 7, we turn to the NCF team to describe the distinct roles and forms of care work that sustain the conflict mitigation programme that they have run for almost two decades now. In the last section, Chapter 8, we first summarise our main findings so far. Then we reflect on the support and training conservation practitioners might require to address similar challenges in the future.

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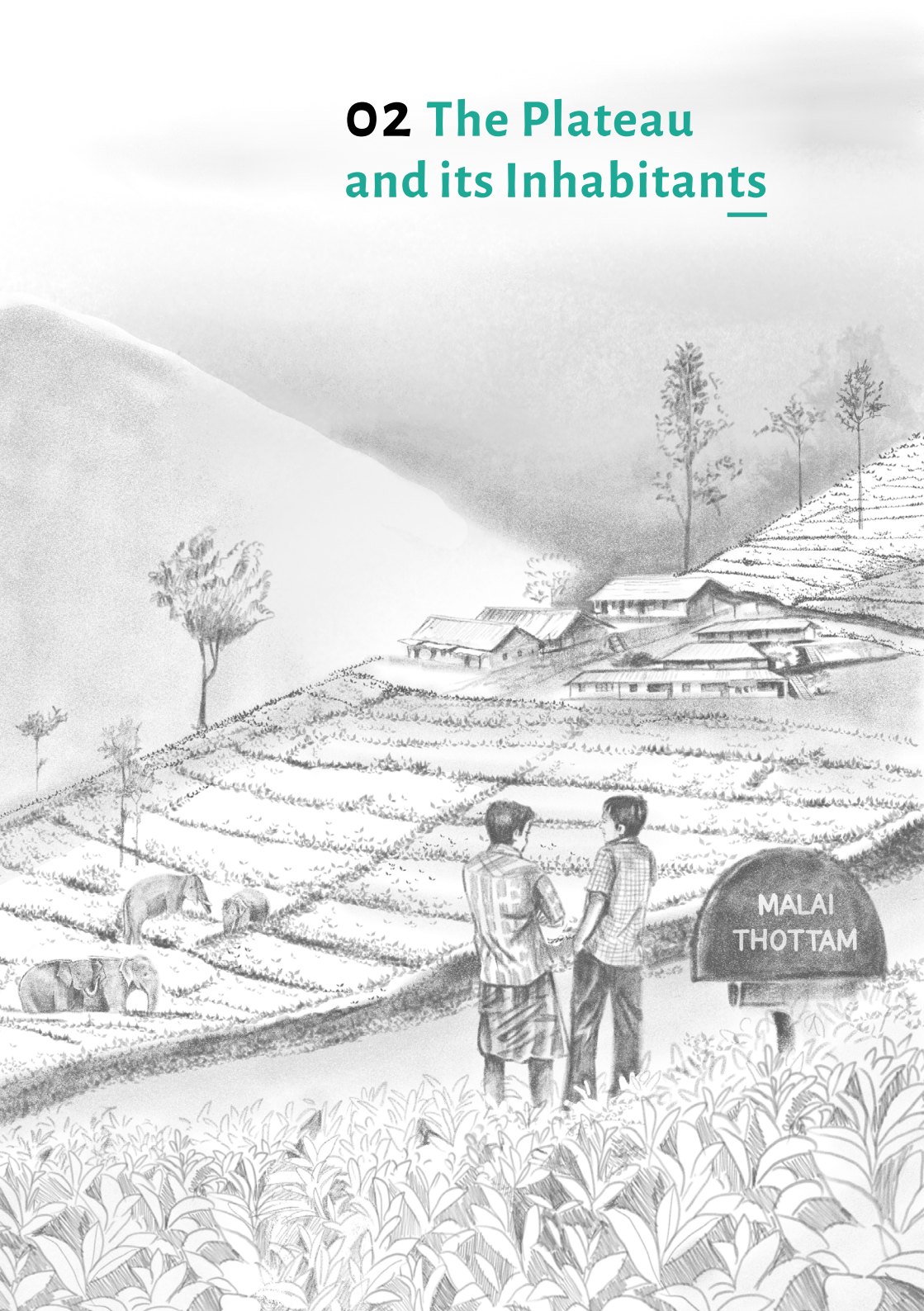
02 The Plateau and its Inhabitants



Valparai is a plateau located in the Anamalai Hills of the Western Ghats. As the name Anamalai suggests, this region has always been associated with the presence of elephants (*anai* = elephant and *malai* = hills in both Tamil and Malayalam). The origin of the name 'Valparai' (*val* = tail and *parai* = rock) on the other hand, is somewhat of a mystery because there are no landmark rock formations on the plateau which resemble an animal's tail. In fact, the plateau was previously called Punachi, after one of the earliest tea estates in the region. Later, when that estate went into decline, it was referred to as Valparai, which was the name of yet another tea estate in the region. As these changes of name indicate, plantations became a significant feature of this landscape in the 1900s. From an administrative perspective, Valparai is now a taluk with its own municipality, in the district of Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu.

One of the earliest references to this plateau appears in colonial records of 1875 that refer to a cancelled hunting trip of King Edward VII, then the Prince of Wales, to a peak called Akka Malai which was known to have herds of bison and deer. To identify suitable locations for the King's camping and hunting, a British expedition explored the Valparai plateau thoroughly the previous year. Although the King's trip was cancelled, the expedition's findings indicated that the Anamalai Hills were ideal for the cultivation of tea. Following the trails and maps created by the expedition, an enterprising Indian businessman, Ramasamy Mudalaiar, of the Carnatic Coffee Company, cleared some of the lush forests and attempted to grow coffee in what became the Punachi estate. However, he incurred heavy losses and the estate gradually declined. Then in 1890, the British government dispatched an engineer, Carver Marsh, to build roads across the hills and begin converting the lush forests into tea and coffee plantations.

Marsh was successful because he not only identified suitable land for these plantations but he also developed a plan for the transportation of workers and materials. However, similar to all the plainspeople before him, Marsh too relied heavily on the knowledge of the indigenous communities of the hills - the Kadar, Muthuvar and Malai Malasars. These peoples (especially the Kadars), helped him map the terrain, identify trails, clear the forest and later, many became labourers in the tea estates (Congreve 1941).

Even though Valparai lies at the border of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, it appears that the British always approached the plateau from the Tamil Nadu side (the erstwhile Madras Presidency). Their records repeatedly mention using the paths from Pollachi to Valparai, via Angalakurichi,

Aliyar and Attakatti. Their initial infrastructure too, in the form of roads and ropeways, first linked the plateau to Pollachi and Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu (Congreve 1941). Although they drew up plans to eventually link Valparai to the Cochin port, these did not materialise. Today, we can either enter the Valparai plateau by road from Pollachi, along the same path used by the British expeditions, or by road from Chalakudy, a forested area which falls within Thrissur district of Kerala.

The physical landscape

Let us now consider a typical cross-section of the Valparai landscape: if you scanned the plateau with your eyes moving upwards, you will most probably notice three layers. The base layer is often a water body. Almost any dip in the land will reveal a stream or rivulet, or at least a swamp that is associated with one of the two main *aaru* or rivers that flow through this region - the Nadumalai Ar and the Vellimalai or Koolangal Ar. In fact, the meticulous topographical maps drawn up by the Survey of India even indicate the large bamboo thickets (*moongil*) and narrow valleys (*thodu* in Kadar) that border these water bodies. Above this layer, you will see the second layer, a thick one of tea plantations. In its natural state, the tea plant, *Camellia sinensis,* is a small tree but in plantations it is pruned regularly to a height of 3 to 4 feet, so that it is easy for the workers to pluck the tender, new (flush) leaves. This pruning also gives our eyes an unhindered panoramic view of the landscape and the opportunity to spot a distant herd of bison, or even elephants.

If we raise our eyes further, we can identify the final layer, which consists of clusters of buildings. The clusters reflect the social hierarchy of the plantations. The lowermost cluster of buildings are likely to be the workers line houses. These are often close to a source of freshwater, such as a stream or rivulet. A line house is a rectangular, single-roofed building, which is separated by walls to make 5 or 6 different sections, each of which will be occupied by a single family. You may even notice the year of construction etched on the whitewashed stone walls - some line houses date back to the 1940s. About a dozen of these line houses would be clustered together and each cluster is called a *padi* (perhaps after the Kadar word for 'settlement'). Immediately above would be a set of individual houses, which are bigger than a line house but smaller than a bungalow. These intermediate-sized houses are occupied by the administrative staff of the estates. Above these houses, at the top of the estate, would be bungalows surrounded by gardens - a smaller one for the Assistant Manager and a larger one for the General Manager.

Even in current times, such staff houses and bungalows are referred to as *ayyamar veedu* and *dorai* bungalows. We say "even in current times" because these terms carry historical weight - *ayya* was a Tamil term of respect used for an educated Indian, adept with letters and numbers, whereas *dorai* or 'master' was used to refer to the British officers and gentlemen. In recent decades, many of the staff houses and managers' bungalows have been transformed into guest houses, offices, storage places, hospitals and dispensaries. Some of the workers' line houses have become ration shops and creches. Many people from the older generation still refer to a creche as a *pilla-padi* (*pillai* = child, in Tamil).

Apart from these generic layers, there may be some patches of forest dispersed here and there, with some estates having more of them and others having less. One might expect that in such a landscape, elephants would remain close to the rivers and forest patches while people remained close to the tea gardens and houses. But in reality, as we mentioned in Chapter 1, there is considerable overlap in the space used by both - people use forest and riparian areas while elephants come to the line houses and ration shops. There is temporal overlap too - work in the estates begins at 8 am and ends at 5 pm. However, people do move around even after dark, and elephants move around even in daylight. So, both people and elephants crisscross each other's paths many times a day and inevitably, there are encounters. Some are memorable, while others are tragic.

The eyes of the beholder

As novelists have observed, the way landscapes are described tend to say more about what we are attentive to, rather than the supposed object of our attention. In the case of Valparai, the highly heterogeneous nature of its inhabitants means that there are many different descriptions that circulate. For example, a person in a service sector, such as tourism, might describe Valparai simply as an area with two entry points and good connectivity by road: one from Chalakudy (the Kerala side) and another from Pollachi (the Tamil Nadu side). But for a person interested in nature conservation, Valparai might be described as a frontier zone between different forested areas such as the Eravikulam National Park and Anamalai Tiger Reserve. For a person involved in studying folklore and anthropology, Valparai might be a landscape dotted by the multiple tribal settlements of Kadars, Malai Malasars and others whereas for a person interested in engineering, Valparai is an ideal place to study hydroelectric infrastructure because there are various stations to pump up/down the waters of the Aliyar, Parambikulam and Sholaiyar rivers (apart from tea

and coffee, Valparai also provides electricity and water to other parts of Tamil Nadu). For tea estate workers, Valparai is a conglomeration of 56 estates, in which they live, labour and share memories of their native villages in far-away locations of Tamil Nadu, Jharkhand, Assam etc. And for elephants, Valparai is presumably an important area to feed on a wide range of food (from sugar to bamboo) and rest (in swamps and forest fragments) as they undertake seasonal migrations from one forest area to another.

The heterogeneous social composition of the plateau is also captured in more objective terms by the 2011 Census of India report (C-16), which lists the following mother tongues as being spoken in Valparai: Tamil (63313), Malayalam (5710), Telugu (980), Hindi (375), Kannada (240), Assamese (91), Urdu (69), English (16), Marathi and Nepali (14 each), Kodugu and Arabic (5 each), Punjabi and Nicobarese (4 each), Bengali (3) and Others (9). One reason for this diversity is that in recent years, there has been a huge influx of estate workers from other parts of India. For example, many estates workers claim, "half of their estates and line houses are populated by Assam and Jharkhand people" whereas "Tamil and Malayalam [speaking] workers are long gone". In almost every *padi* it is easy to meet at least one or two non-Tamil/Malayalam speaking families. This is a significant shift because there are some *padi* in Valparai which have traditionally been identified with specific districts of Tamil Nadu: For example, there are entire *padi* associated with Sivaganga and Tirunelveli districts because in the past, especially during famines, a large number of people from different villages but related to each other, migrated to Valparai and occupied that *padi*. Similarly, some *padi* are identified with Sri Lankan Tamils, as they migrated to Valparai to escape the political unrest in their country. For instance, Sri Lankan refugees came in large numbers to work in the government-owned Chinna Kallar estate in the 1970s. At present, Valparai is on the cusp of another shift as many *padi* are increasingly occupied by Jharkhandi, Assamese or Hindi-speaking workers although there appears to be no single reason for their immigration such as famines or political unrest.

The 2011 Census states with precision that the total population of Valparai is 70,859, of which Scheduled Castes constitute 59.68 % and Scheduled Tribes constitute 1.75 %. The sex ratio is 1013 and the literacy rate is quite high at 84%. In terms of religion, Valparai's population is predominantly Hindu (83%), followed by Christians (14%) and Muslims (3%). Interestingly, in contrast to the conservationists and regardless of the presence of a large elephant population, the 2011 Census classifies the plateau as a whole, as an "urban" place. Moreover, according to the Census, the population of Valparai *reduced* by 25% between 2001 to 2011

and hence Valparai is noteworthy as the only urban place with negative population growth. Another point of interest is that 85 % of the workers in Valparai are categorised as "other workers", as there is no appropriate category to record plantation workers (the Census categories are cultivator, agricultural labourer, household industry worker and others). Consequently, according to the Census, despite its urban nature, Valparai does not have significant economic activity and "no major commodity [is] produced" - a sharp contrast to the ground reality of a plantation-dominant landscape with a booming tourism industry. Although exact figures are not available, a recent newspaper report estimated that around 1200 vehicles with 4500 passengers entered the plateau on a single day in November last year (Times of India 2025).

Steeped in history

One of the earliest book-length texts we came across on Valparai is a well-known one, 'The Anamallais' by C. R. T. Congreve. Published in 1941, just before World War II, it provides glimpses of how the densely forested landscape of Valparai was surveyed and gradually converted to tea and coffee plantations from around the 1860s to the beginning of the 20th century. Written largely from a planter's perspective, the text describes the efforts taken to explore different parts of the plateau, clear forests from slopes suitable for cultivation, set up estates, etc. It also describes the establishment of the Anamalai Planters' Association. However, although the narrative is direct, it is quite disjointed and confined to official documents. Congreve focuses mainly on the 'improvements' made by the British, that too the 'big men' on the plateau. Hence, we don't quite get a coherent sense of the landscape as it was. There is some mention of the efforts taken by the estate managers in the initial years, but the book does not describe the work and experiences of the numerous immigrant coolies and workers in this forested frontier region.

In contrast, the first fictionalised account of Valparai, titled 'Red Tea' claims to "give a clear and true picture of estate life from the 1920s to 1930s". It was written by P. H. Daniel in English and then translated into Tamil as *Eriyum Panikaadu* by Era Murugavel. Daniel was probably the first non-British medical officer to work in this region - he was the Chief Medical Officer of the hospitals in the Periakaramalai and Mudis estates, in the 1940s and 50s. He also established the first union for estate staff, the Anamalai Staff Association. His novel portrays Valparai as a small market town that comes to life mainly on Sundays and festival days, where estate agents frequently poach workers from each other and business persons sell goods from Pollachi at inflated prices. In the novel, the workers primarily identify themselves as belonging to particular

estates and the plateau itself is simply called 'Anamalai', not Valparai.

But for a text that represents the entire Valparai plateau as we know it today, we have to look to a Tamil novel published in 2022 - it is titled *Koopukadu*: Valparai's Story. The author Aara lived in one of the Valparai estates when he was a young boy. Based on his recollections, this novel claims to portray the "lives of second and third generation estate workers in the 1970s and 80s". Here, we find a description of Valparai as a bounded landscape with all the 56 estates, the characters are infused with the collective experience of living in this region, and the author represents "Valparai as a country in itself". Overall, Valparai in the last hundred years has been written about from the perspective of a planter (C. R. T Congreve), a doctor cum unioniser (P. H. Daniel) and an estate worker's son (Aara). Elephants find a place in all three accounts, although in varying degrees and capacities. In the next section, we discuss these in greater detail.

On the shoulders of giants

Congreve's book provides observations that invite us to reflect on the presence of elephants on the Valparai plateau. For instance, he establishes that there was a large population even then: "I may say broadly the whole country to the south, south-west and west of Paralai, is the feeding and breeding ground of large numbers of wild elephants, many of which halt there throughout the year, and if disturbed by extensive opening up, they would probably change their abode and migrate south-west or west into Cochin" (pg 39). Later, he adds "Elephants infested the whole country between November and March, when the lower slopes of the hills became too hot for them, and when the [forest] fires started and the flies got bad. They came up from both the valley below Valparai, down towards Cochin, and from the valley below the Mudis" (pg 133). He goes on to describe the habitat preferred by elephants: "Huge herds took up their residence in places which suited them where there was water, bamboo scrub, etc., and it was almost certain that in a walk from Paralai to Nadu Ar one would meet at least one lot somewhere, and often several different herds" (pg 133). Another set of observations that he and an earlier hunter-surveyor, General Douglas Hamilton share are worth highlighting here. In Hamilton's field journal, published in 1892, he says this about one of his forays into the Anamalais: "On our return, we followed an elephant path for several miles, the gradient of this path was truly wonderful, these sagacious animals avoiding every steep or difficult ascent with the skill of engineers!" (pg xxviii). Congreve too, acknowledges "The only means of travel were along various paths made by the elephants and by the jungle people inhabiting the Anamallais"

(pg 73). Further, he observes that "The elephants had certain well defined paths which they had probably used for centuries to move about the country, and though the jungle was felled along these paths, the elephants still continued to use them for many years, irrespective of whether they had to pass close to houses or not (pg 95)." We draw your attention to these details because they indicate that the British literally walked in the footsteps of elephants while exploring the plateau and since these trails indicated the most optimal route across difficult terrain, it is likely that many of the areas that were first deemed 'accessible' and cleared for development lay along such trails. Moreover, it is also likely that elephant trails were converted first into cart tracks to transport materials and labour, and later into pukka roads. Therefore, some of today's tarmac roads across the plateau, such as the winding ghat road up from Pollachi may, in some sections at least, have been laid on the traditional trails of elephant herds. This obviously raises the question of, are elephants in our way or are we in theirs?

Encounters in fact and fiction

With respect to the British surveyors most encounters occurred in the context of hunting of elephants (see Hamilton 1892 for example), which was allowed under some provisions of the Madras (Wild Elephants Preservation) Act of 1873. But with respect to planters on the other hand, although the government leased out vast swathes of forest land for clearing and cultivation of tea and coffee, it insisted that they had to abide by one of the provisions of the Act which stated that "The elephants have the right to way across the estates" (pg 61). Much as they do today, under the Indian Wildlife Protection Act, 1973.

A close reading of Congreve's book also gives us a picture of the different types of damages caused by elephants. For example, he says "These elephants did very little damage to cultivation except when they slid down a steep slope which happened to be planted up" (pg 134). In the succeeding paragraph, he provides another example of incidental damage - when Carver Marsh grew plantains on Paralai, "Elephants found these plantains, and night after night they used to return to feed on them, till there was nothing but the roots left, and we sat and watched them kicking out these roots, and splitting them up and eating them. The coffee nursery ceased to exist, as the herd used to walk backwards and forwards across it daily" (pg 134-5). With respect to buildings, he says "Elephants on at least two separate occasions in different years got across the drain and walked right through the building, pulling it down behind them. The wild elephant is naturally a curious creature, and loves going to see what things are; and Loam's camps, with their corrugated iron roofings, were

constantly being pulled down and the roofing smashed to bits; and one sometimes saw large sheets bent up against the corrugations, with two large holes punched right through by a bull elephant's tusks" (pg 135-6). He also reports that trenches are of limited utility in keeping away elephants: "[In Sirikundra] one set of cooly lines was built in the middle of the first 50-acre clearing, with a huge elephant trench right round it, but despite this, two years running elephants managed to get across the trench pulling down the lines" (pg 173).

Daniel's *Red Tea* on the other hand, foregrounds the voices of estate workers and their perspectives on wildlife encounters and warnings about wildlife are a recurring motif in the novel. For instance, when an agent cum supervisor named Vellaiyan brings a flock of people from Thoothukudi to the Anaimalais, to work in an estate, Daniel describes the scene at Attakatti as follows: "Do not venture into the forest," shouted Vellaiyan, straining his throat. "Inside the forest, leopards, tigers and other animals will be there. They will just kill you. [But] Do not fear, wherever there are a lot of people, forest animals will not come there." A worker said,"Look, there is a black monkey above, jumping from one tree to another." "If we proceed higher [up the mountain], we will see lots of black monkeys, they will call out like owls,"claimed Vellaiyan.' Then the character of Vellaiyan goes on to speak about elephants: "At night, they come into the estates. When we are in the estates, we must never venture deep inside the forest. Animals will come. In the evenings too, we must not go far away from the lines we stay in." "When we go to work in the early morning, will they attack us?" a woman asked. "Many people work together. If people stay together in a place, forest animals won't come, I have told you already. Then, no forest animals will come out of the forest in the daytime. Only the wild pig might come out in the daytime. That is very dangerous. It can gore and tear a person apart. From the place we work, no one must go alone or go far away"concluded Velliayan.

Although fictional, this discussion clearly captures the typical doubts, fears and uncertainties estate workers experience with respect to wildlife. And Vellaiyan dispels them by clearly instructing the workers on what they should do to stay safe. Even though Daniel's novel portrays Velliayan mainly as a person who exploits the workers, this discussion about wildlife reveals a relatively caring aspect of his character, where through his sharp instructions, he teaches these fresh immigrants from the plains how to stay safe in a hilly forested region.

Moreover, in *Red Tea*, Daniel sketches a comparison between Munnar and Valparai in the form of a dialogue between two workers: "In Munnar, people are saying forest elephants are creating a lot of problems. Is it true?" asks one. "Yes, before 9 o'clock in the morning and after 5 o'clock

in the evening, no one can move along the Udumalaipettai - Munnar road. A lot of coolies have died because they foolishly went outside at that time. Mostly, it is the lone forest elephant which creates a lot of problems. It comes very close to people's homes in the estates. Such elephants like the banana and sugarcane plants in the gardens of coolies. Even within the estates, it is not good for anybody to come outside after dark." The first worker then says, "There are elephants here too [...] Elephants chase the coolies who venture into the forest to cut firewood. Even the Pollachi road is not safe after dark. [Because] elephants like bamboo shoots a lot - groups and groups of elephants come and eat the bamboo shoots growing on both sides of the road." Later in the story, an incident in which a lone elephant chases a group of estate workers is also described: "Run, run, I think it must be a lone, single elephant. It is swinging its trunk from side to side, that is why we are hearing it trumpet on and off. We need to get out of the forest and reach the grassland," said Appavu. The trumpeting sound was nearing them. Appavu shouted "If the elephant comes closer we must fall flat on the grass, face down to the ground."

Aara's writing, on the other hand, focuses on the happiness and joy in the lives of estate workers because he felt that Daniels' novel emphasised the exploitation and misery and therefore, did not offer a balanced picture. The title *Kooppukkadu* is a term that refers to a patch of forest that has been cleared of the understorey (i.e., shrubs and bushes) to plant cardamom, a plant that needs a lot of shade and moisture. Taking a thematic, rather than chronological approach, Aara claims that Valparai initially had *kooppukkadu*, then the taller trees were cut to convert the shade-planted cardamom fields into coffee estates (*kaappikkadu*) and then finally, all the trees were cut down to create tea estates (*thottam*). In the novel, he draws on his own family history of being estate workers and affirms that there is more nuance to their lives than being mute victims of exploitation although that too occurs. Hence, Aara's narrative introduces us to volleyball matches, boxes of film reels being transported from one estate to another for movie screenings across multiple estates, and Pongal festivities alongside the grimmer aspects of estate life.

Elephants on the other hand, remain somewhat peripheral figures. For example, in one instance, a character describes clearing the forests for plantations as follows: When we people cut trees along the [forest] border, wild animals would move further inside the forest. We destroyed all the forest and left a few *solai* (fragments) inside the estates. So wild animals that would stay inside the forest suddenly came out. Elephants, wild pigs, bison … elephants would come as a group and stay in a place for two days. That place is adjacent to the *solai* and estates."

With respect to the workers' life, Aara describes encounters with elephants that are realistic in their details: "At night, if there were any sudden sounds, Massi and Kumar would instinctively shout loudly as they stepped out of their huts - elephants could be standing on the other side of the trench. They would eat bamboo like it was sugarcane. Initially, Chellappa was shivering due to fear when working there. Because daily, one or two elephants would come there and remain till the morning. They would leave only when the sun rose. But slowly, Chellappa got used to them. He understood that everything would be fine as long as they remained on the other side of the trench. But if elephants trumpeted, his intestines would dissolve in fear -"If an elephant catches us, they will stamp on our heads and burst our skulls open." Now as cardamom plantations are deep inside forest, those workers faced even more problems than the tea estate workers, when they wanted to commute to a town. "Visibility is nothing, we cannot see anything…Once, while taking a short cut, a person got caught because he was ignorant of the presence of elephants there. He was still drunk from the alcohol he had consumed the previous day. But before he could turn to run away, the elephant pushed him to the ground with its trunk. We later collected his body in a jute bag and cremated it."

Overall, for both the fiction writers, Daniel and Aara, the focus remains on the workers' lives. Events involving elephants are subsidiary episodes and even there, neither writer uses them as symbols of either the cruelty or the joys of life. The elephants simply exist like the hills. Perhaps most significantly, even in these two works of fiction, their presence is treated with restraint - the workers do not protest or demand the translocation of elephants even though their fears are described explicitly. From this brief tour of the historical and fictional realms we can imagine what Valparai might have been like in the past. In the next chapter, we move into the empirical realities of the present.

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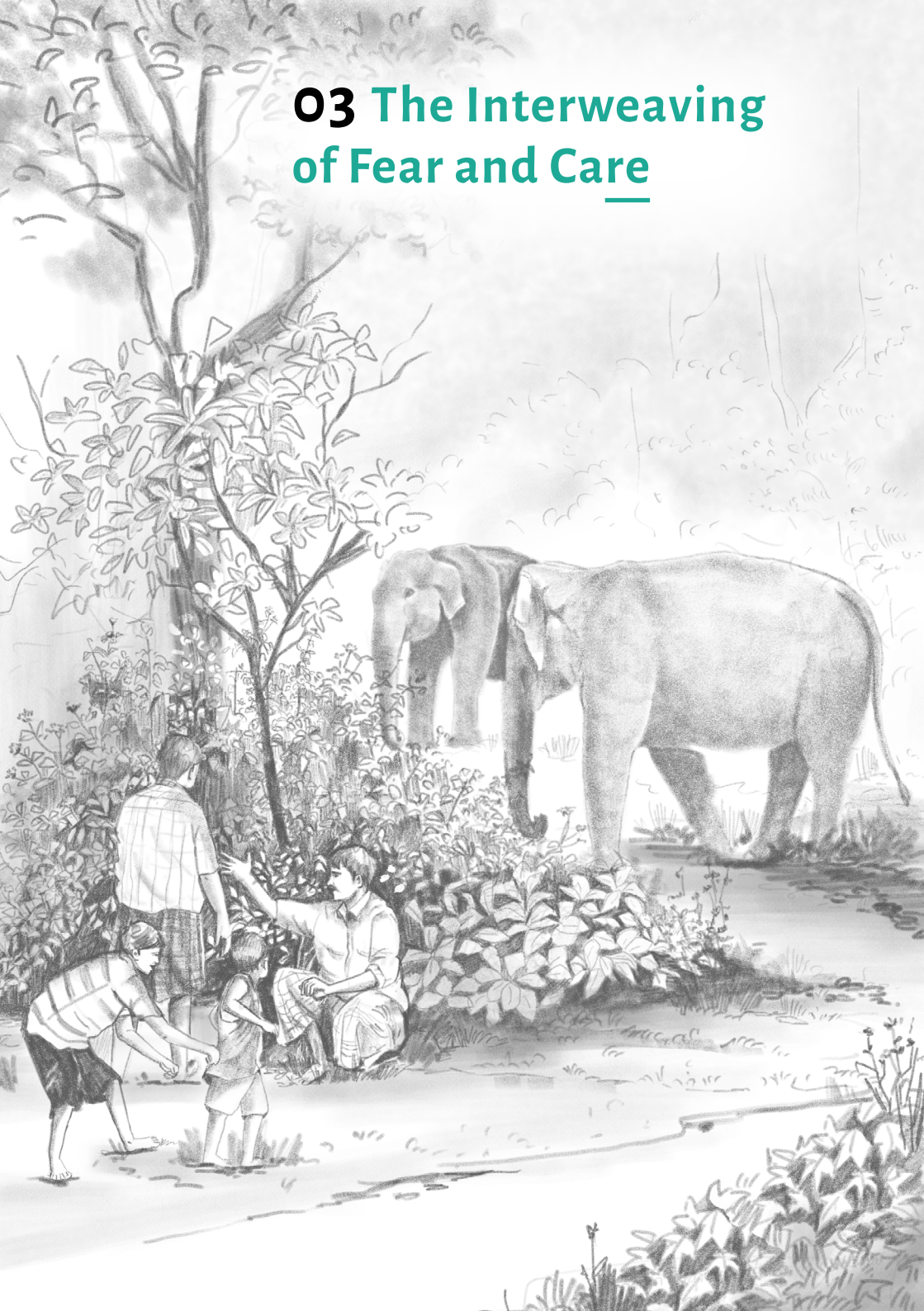
03 The Interweaving of Fear and Care



Since the residents of Valparai are used to seeing wild boar, gaur and elephants in the forest fragments adjoining their own backyards, we may assume they are comfortable in the presence of wildlife. We may even expect them to be interested in, if not intensely concerned about, the fate of these animals and that this interest facilitates coexistence. But contrary to what we might expect, it appears that there is fear of wildlife, such as elephants or bears. And secondly, this sense of fear *contributes* to the possibility of coexistence rather than foreclosing it.

To unpack this statement, let us tell you about two anecdotes we heard from Preethi and Mohan, both long-time residents of Valparai. During our interview, Preethi told us "At night when elephants came at odd times, my mother and father used to take me there and we would watch from a distance, that's all. We used to be scared of elephants. *Yaanai appadi na bayam than* (Elephant means fear.) Will it come behind us or in front of us…that fear used to be there." As Preethi's recollection indicates, the sight of an elephant triggers a pang of fear even in residents who have seen them in the vicinity for several years. Many people don't feel entirely comfortable in the presence of these nonhumans. Conservationists tend to view such fear as a barrier to coexistence and hence usually try to reduce it by conducting outreach programmes that try to inculcate a sense of appreciation instead (for example by emphasising that it is endemic or by describing some unique biological traits).

However, the anecdote we heard from the other resident, Mohan, points to a different local perspective on fear. Mohan said, "The German guy, who died recently [in February 2025], did not have *bayam* (fear)... certainly he would have done something to the elephant. He would have shown his *thiramai* (skills) in front of the elephant, and then the elephant showed its *thiramai* to him, that's all. We cannot think we are great and mighty in front of elephants."

Mohan was referring to a tragic incident that occurred on 4 February 2025: A tusker was seen walking on the winding road leading up from Pollachi to Valparai. Motorists on either side waited at some distance for the elephant to enter one of the thickets on either side of the road. However, one motorbike rider, a German tourist, decided to drive ahead. Other motorists and frontline staff of the Forest Department who were also present, shouted out to alert him to the presence of the elephant a few metres ahead but it appears that he decided to drive on and overtake it. At first, the tusker swept aside the bike and the rider with its trunk. Then the rider picked himself up and went towards his bike. This time, the elephant charged at him. One of the tusks pierced the tourist and he was severely injured. He was given first aid and rushed to a hospital in Pollachi but he died a few hours later. Understandably, this incident was on

everyone's minds for the next few months. But Mohan voices a commonly held sentiment amongst the residents that some measure of mutual fear creates a sense of restraint and maintains an implicit 'decorum' of interaction that is essential between humans and nonhumans who share space. Otherwise, as Mohan's comment highlights, both sides may begin to "show off" their strength and this would degenerate into conflict that could result in fatal injuries to either side.

Fearful but empathetic

Although elephants are highly revered in Indian mythology and tradition, from an everyday perspective, people fear their size, strength and intelligence (see Keil 2025 for such accounts from Assam). For instance, when elephants are attracted by the smell of foods such as rice, sugar, jackfruit, or alcohol, they can and do demolish homes, storage sheds and ration shops. As the proprietor of a ration shop observed, "Especially on the days we unload rice, they (the elephants) come. My son and I don't sleep those nights. We stay in the shop, keep a fire going, and sit outside. We will be thinking elephants won't come, but on those days, it will come and attack the shop and take the rice. What to do…if we chase it, it will go but still, what will it do for its food?" Similarly, there are residents who believe the elephants, like them, move to different places in search of a better life. For instance, Kumar who belongs to the indigenous Kadar community commented, "Especially now, in summer, food and water are scarce. [The elephants] search for water. Even though we see the forest as vast, water is available only in a few spots. When elephants give birth, they need secure places with access to water, just like how we choose where to live based on comfort and safety. They do the same. So, they travel long distances to find such places. Think about us…..we go all the way to cities like Chennai or Bengaluru for work. Why? Because we are looking for something."

Clearly, *bayam* or the sense of fear is intertwined with a generosity of spirit towards these nonhumans. In other words, it appears that the affective response to elephants can be a mixture of fear *and* care; the two emotions are not mutually exclusive. Another comment Anand has commonly heard amongst old estate workers who struggle to make ends meet is, "We, with this small stomach, we keep looking for ways to fill it. *Avalo periya vayaru vechchitu adhu sapadukku evalo thedavendirukkum*. [Imagine with that huge stomach, how hard it (the elephant) must be searching for food!]" His colleague Ganesh, whom as we mentioned earlier has been working to mitigate human-elephant conflict for over a decade now in Valparai, recognises that it is these moments of empathy

that infuse his work with hope. He acknowledged, “[...] for saying that phrase - let elephants eat - a good heart is needed.”

The crumbling of everyday life

Bayam has a particularly disruptive effect on people’s mundane activities. For instance, a student who was describing the challenges of getting home safely after dark said, "If we board a bus before 6 pm, everything is fine. [Otherwise] we have to bargain with an auto driver, and he might ask for more money, saying that he got information that a bear or leopard or elephant is standing in the way. Many drivers tell us the truth, but some just want more money and lie about some animal’s presence. [...] Most of the time, it is this kind of worry - finding a bus, the need to bargain, the need to inform our parents, search for friends from the same area to go back with - that causes us trouble, (it is) not elephants which cause trouble.” Anand shared another example of how social relations could become strained due to mundane disruptions: "... earlier (before NCF’s intervention), what used to happen was that after 6 pm it used to be a kind of house arrest. People couldn’t go out if they had to attend some function, even though interpersonal relationships are dependent on that. [Their relatives would say] “Oh you didn’t turn up for my daughter’s wedding!” So, people–entire families–have fought with each other, based on these things.”

Anand then went on to narrate an anecdote from his early days, which prompted him to think more deeply about the everyday life of people who share space with wildlife: "[...] I received a call from a woman, whose house had got damaged. So, I rushed to the spot. And the entire house – one side wall was broken completely – and I went and asked that woman, “What happened?” She said at night, around 3 o’clock, they heard a noise in their bedroom, and they turned on the light and there was this calf. Inside their bedroom. Somehow… because calves, you know, they have this exploratory behaviour but each weighs about 100 kg so if it touches the door, it opens. This poor thing landed up in their bedroom. Husband and wife got up and picked up their children and ran towards the back door. By then the calf was quite scared, made a noise, and the mother who was standing outside the house, pulled down the entire wall to get the calf out. But the woman didn’t complain about the elephants. What she told me was, “I could understand how the mother elephant feels, seeing how I felt about (keeping) my children (safe).” Anand found the woman’s empathy all the more remarkable because he has stayed in the cramped working-class houses of Valparai to understand their everyday challenges. As he admitted, it was hard to keep calm and remain indoors

while a few metres away a huge animal attempted to break into your small kitchen at night.

At the same time, Anand observed, "The most overwhelming fear that people have, is fear for their lives. Because if property gets damaged, the (plantation) company will repair it; if the noon meal centre gets damaged, the government will replace it. But if a person is injured or life is lost, then nothing can replace that. So that is the fear people feel (most intensely)." He explained that an untimely death–usually of the man of the household–places a significant economic burden on the surviving partner. And due to these mounting financial constraints, the children may lose access to education which in turn, compromises their future wellbeing. It is this risk of steep socioeconomic decline and its far-reaching consequences that convinced Anand that preventing human deaths from encounters with elephants should take precedence over the damage to property and livelihoods.

Elephants in a cameo role

In other encounters, the elephants play a cameo role in what is primarily a human drama: a cameo, as you may recall, is a character who suddenly enters a scene and catalyses the plot in a new, unexpected direction. Although 'cameos play' a pivotal role, they are not part of the primary cast of characters. For example, some residents believe that elephants appear out of nowhere to frighten people when they are uncivil to each other. For instance, Kamatchi amma, an elderly woman who lives near Injiparai told us about an ailing neighbour who was a difficult patient and used to argue frequently with his wife. According to Kamatchi amma, the couple were having a particularly loud quarrel outside their house one night, when an elephant unexpectedly entered their backyard: "It glared at them and kicked the utensils [the wife] had kept outside for cleaning and went away. The elephant almost spat at them, as if to say, 'what are you living for, why are you always fighting with each other?'" She explained, "Elephants do not like humans fighting. They become angry if we are angry, fighting and shouting at each other."

Alternatively, people may be struggling with a crisis in their personal lives, and this could warp their sense of judgement and make them behave rashly around elephants. One of the frontline members of the Anti-Depredation Squad (ADS) recounted an incident where a 50-year-old man living in the labour lines of a plantation suddenly ran out in front of a group of elephants, shouting "Kill me!" The squad members were initially taken aback by this turn of events, but they managed to tackle the man and pin him to the ground before he got too close to the

elephants. They later came to know from the neighbours that the person was depressed because he had been cheated of his savings, and his children had refused to support him. The frontline member, known as Senior Daniel (because there is another younger member of the same name) said philosophically, "Many have vented on elephants. Many bad behaviours shown towards elephants are nothing but a person's frustration with family, relatives, job and many other things. There is no lack of problems in anybody's life." Moreover men, in particular, when facing personal crises often take refuge in alcohol - "*soozhnilaikku kudikkaranga* (drinking to deal with the situation)", as it is termed in Valparai. Such inebriated people have been known to walk around in the dark in the vicinity of elephants, or even march right up to one: their loss of fear, *bayam poyiduchu*, is often invoked when people later describe the resulting injury or death.

The conservationists, Ganesh and Anand, also mentioned a handful of instances of people getting injured by elephants in the plains due to the machinations of their own family members: these families had deliberately sent out an elderly or inebriated person alone at night to guard the crops from elephants. When the person got injured, the families had promptly filed for compensation from the forest department. Such anecdotes suggest that the reasons for a human-elephant encounter ending negatively may, in some situations, have more to do with the darker side of human sociality than with elephant behaviour.

When elephants are afraid

Occasionally, the roles get reversed: it is the human who gives the elephant a fright and in reaction, it tries to 'defend' itself and ends up injuring the person. Consider the story we heard from Thomas, who is a *kai katti* in Injiparai (a *kai katti* is a type of security guard who works in the estates, his role involves tracking elephant movement inside the property and informing workers accordingly). One evening, Thomas saw a man he knew, smoking a *beedi* and walking down a path lost in thought. The man had earlier in the day reported seeing an elephant in the vicinity and the same animal was now standing on a mound at the end of the path, near a water tank. After a few minutes, Thomas realised the man had not noticed the elephant, so he shouted at the latter to turn back. However, the man continued walking right up to the elephant. When the startled elephant pushed him aside with its trunk, he hit his head against the wall of the water tank and died instantly. The elephant moved off into the tea bushes as Thomas stood frozen in place, witnessing this tragedy. What Thomas wanted to convey to us was the unpredictability of *human* behaviour and how we may inadvertently make animals nervous*:*

Thomas emphasised that the very same person who had earlier noted the presence of an elephant was later so oblivious to it that he almost collided with it. Moreover, the man was absolutely sober at the time of the encounter, so his actions came as a shock to Thomas—and probably to the elephant as well. As Thomas emphasised, elephants cause injury or death only when they feel threatened and react strongly: “Till now, no elephant has chased and killed a human. If elephants chase and kill, no human can live here, isn’t it?”

Smoothing the edges of fear

The conservationists - here, the forest department and NCF’s own team - acknowledge that sharing space with wildlife carries an inherent risk of injury and mortality and hence, fear is but a natural human response to such a situation. For instance, a Forester commented, "Where can we station our men to stop bears from attacking (people)? How to profile leopards - annually, seasonally, individual traits, paths - you tell me! What can we say to people when they encounter them? They attack in a moment, even before you register their presence (*pakkurathukku munnadiyae*) - just attack, what can we do, how to predict and send our men?” However, the caveat to this is that elephants are not a predatory species and are more predictable in their movements and behaviours. Hence, a negative encounter occurs only when the elephant strikes out in self defence. Consider the instance of the absent-minded man who walked right up to the elephant near the water tank and startled it; it appears to have struck out in surprise and irritation, as one might swat away a fly, rather than lain in wait to ambush the man. Therefore, these ‘conflicts’ are not premeditated and perhaps better described as unfortunate or fatal accidents between the human and nonhuman, rather than as an ‘attack’.

Nevertheless, this is of cold comfort to people who live alongside such powerful animals and the task of care here, is to either reduce the occurrence of such encounters (through the early warning systems) or to construct a more benign grammar of interaction (through awareness programmes on how to conduct ourselves in the proximity of elephants so that we do not evoke an injurious response). As one of the conservationists, Ganesh, described it, "Instead of (these encounters) having a hard edge, we smoothen it. The boundaries, the edges, we smoothen. That is in the mind, the change. (It) is happening in the thoughts of people.” The importance of de-escalation is echoed by the ADS members as well. Even though they may be from one of the local communities, they say with pride that unlike other locals, *they* are people who can manage elephants by nudging and chivvying them out of the

way: "*methuva*" (gently) and "*anba*" (with love) are how they describe their actions. The ADS members are vehement that they do not drive the elephants away (*verattave maattom*) unlike some of the local boys - they consider such people to be uncivilised and use the term *kaattu pasanga* (wild people in the sense of barbarians, not forest dwellers) to castigate such youth. Once again, the implicit notion of behaving with restraint or decorum runs through the idea of how one must engage with elephants.

As mentioned earlier (in Chapter 1), like most wild animals, elephants too have a natural tendency to avoid the proximity of people and this escalates into fear when people use fire crackers, loud noises, burning tyres, etc. Such measures may not only frighten elephants away but make them perceive humans as threats. Moreover, when startled, elephants may charge at humans and use their feet and trunk to trample or throw aside persons. This can result in grievous bodily harm or even death. Since this species are quick learners with long memories, these unpleasant experiences may make them react more aggressively in their next encounter with people. Therefore, as conservationists often rue, it takes only one intensely negative encounter to tip the scales from a plateau of toleration to a spiral of conflict between species and smoothing the edges of fear, to prevent such confrontations, is a crucial part of their work.

Quirks of elephants

Caring for humans and elephants also requires deft handling that is based on situated knowledge i.e., an understanding of particular herds and individuals, as well as on particular settlements and the people living or working there. Secondly, it calls for tinkering based on this situated knowledge as well as a historical sense of how the relations between that particular herd and that particular group of people have unfolded over the years. This is required because as we mentioned earlier, elephants respond not only to the present moment but also to their memory of previous encounters. The ADS members explicitly recognise the ability to tinker as one of the hallmarks of expertise. They emphasise the vital need to acquire a long-term understanding of the characteristics of herds and individual elephants in order to prevent negative encounters. Moreover, like the NCF team, they are well aware that the temperaments of herds as well as individual elephants vary considerably - some herds and individuals are to be more feared than others. (they may have taken their cue from Anand's interest in animal behaviour because earlier, some of the ADS members were themselves trained by NCF.) For example, they told us that the Vagamalai herd is a highly irritable one and prone to strong reactions. So, when this herd moves close to housing

lines, they strongly urge people to be silent and stay indoors. On another occasion, they told us about how some of them had spotted a herd some distance away but could not identify it clearly. Eventually, one of them suggested to the others that clapping their hands would help them confirm the identity of the herd because if it was the Vagamalai group, they would immediately react with irritation to such disturbance. If not, it would be the Murugali herd, which was quite placid. Therefore, the ADS members tested their hypothesis by clapping their hands and found that the elephants indeed got irritated (the animals shook their heads, spread their ears or kicked the dust). Then they went off to warn people in the settlement nearby that the Vagamalai herd was approaching and everyone should quietly remain indoors.

Anand offers a complementary perspective on the importance of knowing individual animals, with his story of Bhima. Bhima is a huge bull elephant, who is known to walk through the villages of Hassan, even when in peak musth. According to Anand, as long as one alerts Bhima before approaching him - by coughing or making some slight noise - he is very tolerant of humans in his vicinity. Bhima's temperament is particularly striking when one compares it to the scientific literature on *Elephas maximus* which states that lone male elephants tend to be aggressive, that too during musth. Bhima, on the other hand, is well-known to the locals and has a fan following: there are numerous YouTube videos of him walking sedately through narrow streets with a large crowd of people (usually young men) noisily following him on foot, clicking pictures and recording videos on their mobile phones. Anand says, "I think most elephants do recognise that thing (curiosity of humans) … some are better at handling it, they may be more confident, they don't feel so threatened. For example, if the rest of the elephants also behaved like Bhima, I am sure people will tolerate (them)." Here, knowledge of this individual elephant and his history of calm encounters precludes the need for much tinkering on the part of the conservationists. In fact, as this comment suggests, they feel encounters with such a charismatic individual (rather than, say, one from the Vagamalai herd) is important because such elephants capture the public's attention in a positive way and create space for discussions on coexistence. But on the whole, managing fear in shared landscapes is a particularly challenging task because both sides, human and elephant, have high levels of intelligence, sentience and agency and the conservationists must maintain a normative middle ground to broker a relationality that allows both to flourish. What exactly does this mean in terms of conservation practice?

The calibration of care

As Anand acknowledges, the fundamental fear evoked by sharing landscapes with wildlife cannot (and in the light of what has been discussed in the previous section, probably should not) be entirely dispelled - conservationists need to tinker with care as well as fear. However, he is of the opinion that this fear can often be reduced to tolerable levels if people are forewarned of their chances of encountering an elephant in a particular area, on a given day. Then, they can make an informed choice in terms of their own movement around Valparai and take suitable precautions. As we mentioned in Chapter 1, Anand's perspective was also shaped by an explicit request for help that came from the managers of various tea and coffee estates in the plateau: earlier, when an elephant herd moved into an estate, it caused considerable alarm amongst the workers. The supervisors used to move the workers to another section only to find that the herd too had moved in the same direction. This used to cause repeated disruptions to the functioning of the estate and chasing the herd out merely displaced the problem from one estate to another. Moreover, if a herd stayed within an estate's boundaries for several days, the workers often encountered elephants after daylight hours, near the housing lines and ration shops, when the latter came in search of rice and other foods. This resulted in people getting injured and property getting damaged.

Therefore, one of the first goals of the NCF's team was to reduce conflict within the estates by developing an early warning system that could alert workers and managers about elephant movement in the vicinity. The system builds on data that Anand meticulously collected earlier in 2002-07 - he mapped behavioural signs of stress in elephants against the distance at which they encountered people, as well as the number of people involved. He found that on average, elephants get really agitated, and consequently there is a high likelihood of conflict, when the encounter distance is less than 30m whereas it is safe when the distance is more than 100m. He provides a fine-grained explanation of his findings: "See, charging (behaviour by an elephant) is usually 20-25m… it is like a huge rock coming towards you and people get scared. So most human deaths are within the mock charge distance. Clearly the elephants are not chasing or outrunning people and killing them. The people are just there within (the mock charge distance)." And predictably, he found the larger the crowd of people, the more agitated the elephants got. What really caught Anand by surprise was that there was only a single other study from South Africa that had examined interspecies distances during such encounters. But they too had reported that approaching an elephant closer than 50m often provoked conflict. Further, from a practical point of view, Anand

realised that a distance of 100m was easy for estate persons to gauge since their routine work involved visual assessments of hectares (i.e. 100 x 100m swathes). Therefore, prescribing that a minimum distance of 100m be maintained between people and elephants seemed both safe and feasible. Therefore, his NCF team went on to develop an early warning system that used SMS to alert people who lived or worked in the close proximity of a herd - this entailed tracking, mapping and learning to predict the routes of various herds in the plateau. (A more detailed account of NCF's intervention is provided in Chapter 7). Here, we wish to emphasise that care is not merely sentimental discourses on the beauty or rights of nature - instead, it involves laborious and systematic collection of observations, a deep understanding of the recipients' needs and behaviours, and a pruning of possible solutions, based on the context and its practical constraints.

To conclude, in this chapter, we have described how coexistence may often be achieved by an interweaving of fear with care. Rather than seeing these states as diametrically opposed ones, we should perhaps acknowledge that they are ends of the same spectrum - a spectrum in which one is highly attuned to the presence of the other. Both fear and care magnify our sensitivity towards the presence and needs of nonhumans, in this case the elephants in Valparai.

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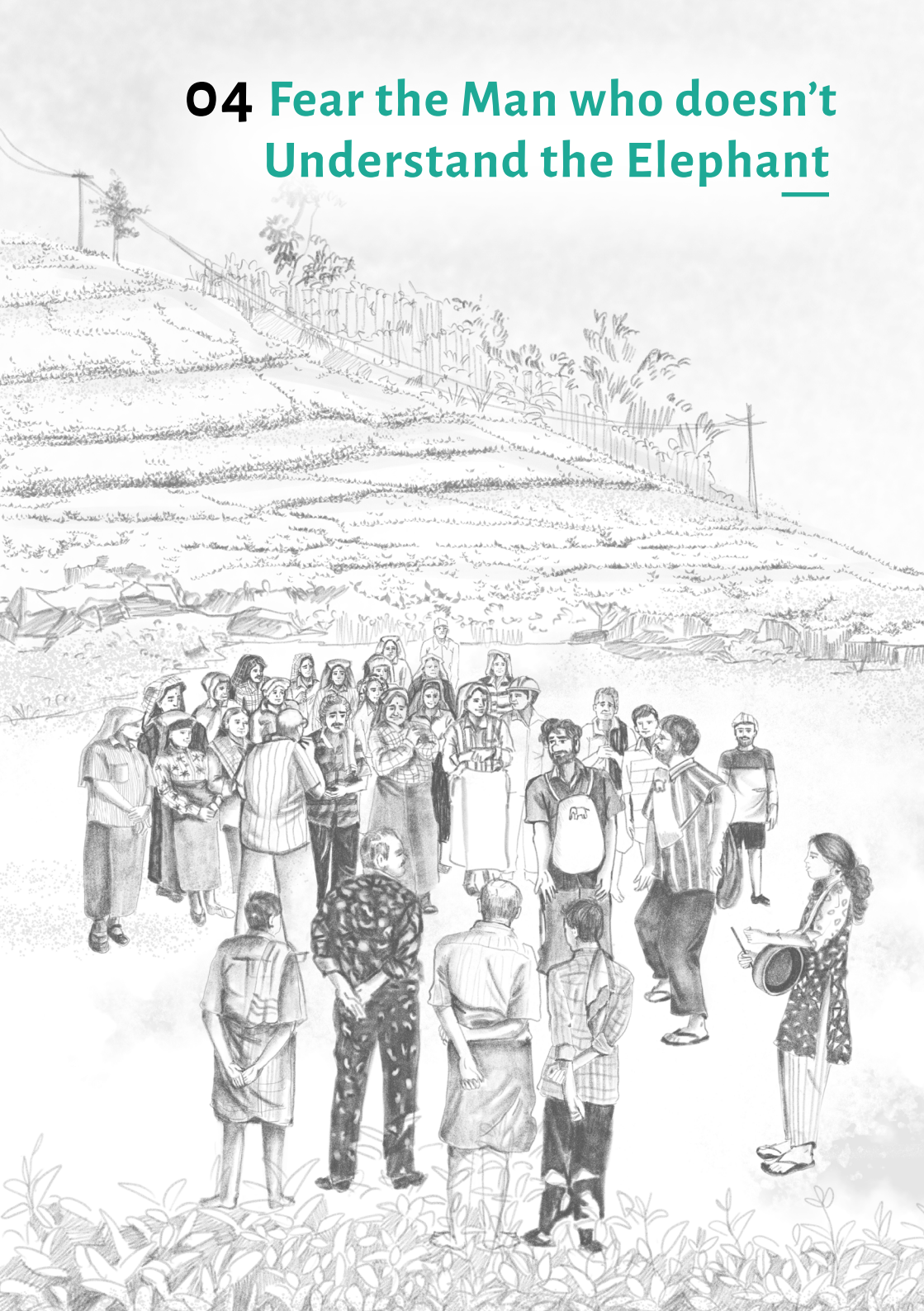
04 Fear the Man who doesn't Understand the Elephant



In the earlier chapter, we discussed how fear is a common affective response that both elephants and people feel during an encounter and how channeling that primeval sense of fear, rather than attempting to 'eradicate' it, could enable both species to respect each other's presence. We also described how people's anecdotes of frightening encounters were at the same time, infused with a sense of empathy for elephants and how they often emphasised the importance of 'maintaining decorum' when interacting with wildlife. We probed this further by asking our respondents what this would mean in terms of action: What are the different ways in which they show their regard for elephants? We paid particular attention to the routine micro-practices of care i.e., small acts of tinkering that local people perform because these lay the foundations of coexistence (you may recall that in the previous chapter, we had described how Anand had arrived at the idea of a 100m 'safe margin'). In addition, we asked them about their less-sensational moments of coming across elephants to understand how much people knew about these nonhumans and how they made meaning of their experiences. (For similar accounts from Assam, see Banerjee and Sinha 2023.) The narratives we heard in response, while they were not always scientifically 'correct', indicate that both people and elephants are curious and observant about each other's behaviours.

Road sense and sensibility

One of the people we spoke to was Velu, a middle-aged bus driver who was born and brought up in Valparai. He told us about how he often sees elephants at a particular bend in the road, close to a large stand of bamboo. "They come after 4 or 5 pm mostly. Like cows, we can commonly see them."

He was categorical that one must wait silently, with the engine running, till such elephants cross the road and enter the bamboo stand. He says crisply, "*Horn adicha, tension ayidum*. [Blowing the horn will only irritate them]. I use my reverse gear if possible and give way to the elephant. It's difficult to reverse on these twisting roads because sometimes there won't be enough space; it's not easy like on straight roads." He observes that private buses tend to have loud reversing alarms which can irritate the elephants and make them charge at the bus.

Arul, who frequently travels by bike to Pollachi, has a slightly different perspective in terms of where a motorist might spot wildlife: "It is actually not tough to ride along hairpin bends, and I have not seen a single animal in those hairpin bends. It is the roads with small bunches of trees and plantations on both sides, basically smaller roads with smaller

turns - that is where the animals cross and riding the bike becomes tough in those situations." He mused about the different animals he had spotted on his bike rides: "Wild pigs - I have not seen them waiting near the edge of the road to look if vehicles are coming by. They always just emerge out of nowhere and push each other and cross the road. No other animal would do that." In contrast, he says the larger animals, such as bison and leopards cross the road cautiously. "They sometimes look straight into our eyes, as if informing us that they are going to cross the road and asking us to stop the vehicle." Elephants, he says, are quite variable but it is easy to read their intentions: "Usually elephants move fast and cross the road - I have seen a mother and baby [calf] running together to cross the road. Elephants which look directly at us think they have all the time and power to cross the road, whereas elephants which just cross the road fast never look at the eyes of the people." Another motorist summarised it as, "Just be calm, like the elephants, and they will not do anything."

These acts of restraint that these drivers enumerate, such as not blowing the horn or flashing headlights on and off at elephants when they cross the road, may seem quotidian to an outsider but they are significant ways in which local people attempt to show care. This brings us back to the point we made in Chapter 1, that caring is not a sentimental activity and it needs to be expressed in a way that is appropriate for the target of our care: in some situations, caring may involve close contact, such as when someone is dealing with a frightened child for example whereas in others, caring may involve *refraining* from such contact as in the case of a wild animal.

A maternal nature

Cattle herders say that they have often seen elephants near the grassy patches around the Jayashree Tea Factory as well as along the Iyerpadi-Karumalai road. "Elephants would be in a swamp, down, and our cows would graze up the slope, immediately above the swamp. Elephants, when they see the cows, will just walk along the swamp for some distance and then climb up to the top, without disturbing the cows." The herders believe that like their cattle, the elephants too lost access to several large pastures once the estates began fencing their boundaries and hence began to move around more frequently than in the past.

The herders believe that animals perceive and relate to each other primarily through the sense of smell. Further, they claim that cattle and elephant odours are similar and hence the two species get along -

neither they nor their cattle have ever been injured in an encounter with elephants. They have also observed that their cows are not agitated even when elephants come close to the cattle sheds at night whereas when bears or leopards prowl nearby, the cows sometimes literally fall ill with fear. The herders use the same terms to describe the odours related to cattle and elephants: for instance, they refer to the pungent smell of urine as *moothra nedi*, the damp smell of the body, especially of newborn animals as *kavichu vaadai* (a raw meaty smell) or *makkiya pacha vaadai* (a smell of mud and damp grass). One elderly herder extended the comparison by saying that cattle and elephants are similar in the way they reproduce because they immediately lick the newborn and suckle the calf. "Motherliness or caring nature is in elephants, as in cows."

The herders also believe that elephants react to certain human bodily odours. "Elephants do not like the smell of women's menstrual blood and blood from the umbilical cord - overall, newborn baby smells… if the elephant sees a mother and the baby, or if we raise the baby and show it to the elephant, then they would understand the situation and leave immediately without attacking." The Kadars, on the other hand, display a reciprocal understanding when they see an elephant with her calf: "She will protect her baby at any cost. We avoid such encounters. Even while collecting forest produce, we leave their paths alone. There's no need to fight for space."

Reasoning and reasonable beings

Many residents believe in the sentience of elephants and therefore believe that not only are elephants capable of reasoned actions but that one can also reason *with* them. A shopkeeper near the bus stand remembered, "Elephants come to eat ripe jackfruit. It stands with its legs up on the tree and balances. But it doesn't destroy our ginger cultivation at all. It carefully went and plucked only the jackfruit." Another young man told us, "I like an idea I heard from my relative - it is about making an elephant dig a hole. We must place a lump of rock salt under the soil, just about 1 ft down. The elephant will come and dig in that place and take out the salt, and then dig much deeper… even up to 10 feet. They are doing it in search of water - they think the salt indicates the presence of water. I have seen it - they are led by their sense of smell."

A Kadar woman from the Karumalai settlement said with conviction, "Our elders told us that elephants, tigers, and bears are a part of the forest just like us. If we speak in our language, they listen - *idu namma makkal* [This is my people; see Chandi and Ramesh 2017]. But outsiders, when they shout, elephants don't understand. That's when they may react."

Along similar lines, a labour union leader recalled an incident where an elephant stood in front of his house: "One elephant came in front of the house, and people set off fireworks and drumbeats. I told them to stop. I went inside the house and lit a camphor lamp, and said, 'Karpaga Vinayaka, please go.' Then the elephant left immediately. Even humans do not go away in that manner. Elephants are more intelligent and have wisdom. Humans gain wisdom later in life, but elephants are born with it. So, if you do not do anything bad, they will not do anything." For him, the elephant is a spiritually wise being - someone to be addressed respectfully rather than driven away.

An eye for details

In Valparai, it is quite commonplace to hear residents telling each other about the small signs that alerted them to the presence of elephants. For instance, we spoke to some people belonging to the indigenous Kadar community and they said that as children, they learnt to tell if an elephant was near from signs such as the presence of warm dung, broken branches, the sound of rustling or heavy breathing. They even said a particular call of the Malabar Whistling Thrush could indicate that an elephant was around. Non-indigenous locals too are often observant of elephant behaviour. For example, Thomas, who as we mentioned in the previous chapter is a *kai katti* in Injiparai, has a set of observations on how elephants move within the estates. He says they rarely walk along the main roads, and they seem to prefer taking narrow paths through the tea bushes, even though those are just one-foot across, "like the women who are going to an area to pluck tea leaves." Thomas has noticed that each year, elephants take the same path near his check-post, eat fruit from the same trees, and emerge from the same side of the forest fragments.

However, what particularly caught our attention was the way people described *elephants* as having an eye for details - people believed elephants notice even small changes in the surroundings and alter their behaviour accordingly. For instance, a group of Kadar in the Velonie settlement echoed Thomas's comment on the elephants' preference for certain trees and paths: "During the jackfruit season or the rains, they start coming in larger numbers. [...] If it comes here in one year, it will keep coming every year. They even remember the route they took the previous year and return the same way. They know which paths will lead where." Similarly, Vadivel, who belongs to the Kadar community and is a member of the ADS, remarked on how this strong memory complicates

mitigation efforts. “Minimum for two to three years the elephants come [to the same places], even if we completely take away all the rice in that path - which is almost impossible.” He continued, “In May, they come looking for water. In the heat, they break water pipes near the tank, drink and leave.”

In another instance, a woman from Gajamudi explained that elephants were spending more time around human habitations because the forests had shrunk. She then continued to describe how elephants learn and remember their way through built-up spaces, “When the ration shop was up there, they [the elephants] broke it. Now the managers have moved the shop here, and since there are a lot of clothes wires across this path, the elephants are not coming this side. [...] There’s a septic tank there, so they don’t go that way either. One time, an elephant stepped on it, and the slab caved in. Since then, the elephants have stopped going to that side. They know there is a septic tank. And if it walks through the wires, it knows ‘If I go, I can’t get out’.” Another person, a plantation worker, had a light-hearted explanation for the frequent visits of a herd of elephants: “Those elephants come here just to supervise [us]… whenever the estate people fix the fences, immediately they come.”

When we shared some of these local perspectives with Anand, he agreed that elephants are curious and intelligent. He chuckled as he said, “The reason why most solar fences do not work against elephants, leaving aside maintenance issues, is that how long can you spend in checking the fence to see if electricity is passing through it - 10 mins? 15 mins? But an elephant has 24 hours! There are lots of videos of elephants breaking a branch, putting it over the fence and crossing over. They have figured out [wood] will not give them a shock.”

Learning from experience

These local observations and beliefs about elephant behaviour are significant because they indicate a deep human curiosity and attentiveness that come from living with elephants every day. Vadivel reflected “Our family teaches us what to do and what not to do when seeing an elephant and how to be safe. Venturing into the forest in childhood is very helpful as we do not get terrified when we see an elephant and at the same time, we do not cause any harm to them. We have a proverb, ‘Don’t fear the elephant, fear the man who doesn’t understand the elephant.’”

Conversely, elephants are as curious and attentive to human behaviour as we are about them. We heard another anecdote from Anand’s doctoral

study that illustrates this trait: "I was studying the Step-ear herd, the herd was very shy, they used to keep away from people. But on one occasion, they came to a colony near a Balaji temple and people wanted to burst crackers to drive them away. Then I told that guy, "Don't do that, they get used to crackers." But he didn't listen to me and he burst crackers. They ran. The next year, the elephants came and when people burst crackers, they ran towards the person bursting [the crackers] and chased him."

Creating a Valparai *vazhakkam*

So far in this chapter, we have sketched how people in Valparai interpret the behaviour and movement of elephants, as well as how they make sense of these interspecies encounters. As you will have noted, many of the people quoted here are long-time residents and they include those who live and work outside the estates, such as cattle herders and bus drivers. Some of this discourse is certainly rooted in lived experience but some of it is also a product of the stream of awareness programmes conservationists have conducted over the years. We witnessed one such effort in November 2025 when NCF hosted a skit for estate workers. The skit was performed by professional theatre artists in Tamil but one of them translated the dialogues into Hindi, for the benefit of the migrant workers. The skit was about 30 minutes in duration and staged along estate roads or near the tea weighing stations so that the workers could take a short break and watch the show. That area's estate supervisor, the ADS team, Range Officer and Ganesh from NCF were also present.

The skit was composed of four typical scenarios and at the end of each, the actors asked the audience to comment on what the correct course of action was. For example, one scenario involved a man stopping to buy a bottle of liquor on his way back home from work. He takes a shortcut through a forest fragment, stopping only to take a sip now and then, not paying attention to the alerts on his mobile phone and the red light of the elephant movement beacon that had been activated on that route. A few minutes later, he is startled by an elephant moving in his direction. At this juncture, the actors halted the skit and asked the audience *"Andha aalu panrathu seriya, thappa? Pass-a, fail-a? Sollunga!"*[Are the man's actions right or wrong? Did he pass or fail? Tell us!]

In some scenarios the audience did not wait for the question and even as the situation unfolded, they began to shout "That is wrong. He failed!" They responded correctly to three scenarios, with no hesitation. However, they were rather confused about how one should behave in the final scenario: this involved an elephant approaching a house, with a

person sitting indoors. Here, the audience gave a range of answers such as the person should move around the house and make some noise, call the neighbours for help, run out through the back door, etc. All of these were incorrect. So here, Ganesh and the actors stepped in and told them that the right thing to do was just remain quiet and indoors. They shared other tips as well: For example, they urged people to wash the jute bags that are used to store rice and sugar before, re-using them as foot mats and to avoid using fruit-scented candles since the smell of such foods attracts elephants. As we mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, such tinkering play a significant role in mediating human-elephant interactions.

While staging the skit, the actors sang a short rhyme:

Yaana lathi erunthalum
Karadi, puli, vanthalum
Kuda serthu erukkum pazhakkam - athu valparai vazhakkam!
Serthu errukkum pazhakkam - athu valparai vazhakkam!

[Even if there is elephant dung/ Even if bears and tigers come/ To live together is the Valparai way of life/ Living together is the Valparai way of life.]

Therefore, as much as the skit reminded people of what they should and should not do, it also tried to present the idea of coexistence with wildlife by referring to it as the norm, the *Valparai vazhakkam.* In other words, NCF was trying to construct the idea of a mixed community and simultaneously remind the audience of what living together entails in terms of their daily lives and routines.

The set of lines the actors began the entire skit with, also added to this message about living in collective harmony. They began by saying, "We live as a society, wild animals are also here. If society needs to function well, if all of us need to live well, what we need to do is maintain individual discipline *[thani manitha ozhukkam*]." The connection that the skit subtly draws between an individual's ability to internalise a disciplinary regime and the resulting wellbeing of the collective inadvertently builds on two historical cultures of discipline that converge in tea plantations. (We term it 'inadvertent' because when we enquired with the actors later, they simply said it seemed a good way to pitch the message without sounding patronising.) The first is that of Christianity and the other is the *kangani* system, both of which are described below.

Convergent cultures of discipline

As the French philosopher Michel Foucault explained (1991), Christianity uses the metaphor of the shepherd and his sheep to convey how individual obedience to an authority figure is necessary for the wellbeing of the group i.e., sheep need to follow the shepherd so that they can individually and collectively thrive. This idea of pastoral care is certainly familiar to plantation workers because many of them are devout Christians and the church has been an important establishment in Valparai for over a century now (the oldest church in the plateau is probably the Sacred Heart Church built in 1916).

The second culture of discipline that links individual conduct to the wellbeing of the larger group is the *kangani* system (Kumar 1988). During the colonial period, the *kangani* was the leader of a group of labourers in plantations - in Tamil the word means overseer. He controlled their recruitment and wages as well as represented their grievances to the owner of the plantation. Since the group often comprised related people or those from the same caste or community, their individual obedience to the *kangani* benefitted their social group as a whole. Therefore, when the theatre artists asserted to the workers that individual discipline lies at the core of a group's wellbeing, they were invoking a widely accepted cultural 'fact'.

We suggest this deep history of linking self-discipline to collective wellbeing is one of the key factors that has contributed to the success of NCF's conflict mitigation programme within the estates of Valparai. Because as we mentioned in Chapter 1, their entry was facilitated by the estate managers themselves and all of NCF's recommendations have first been shared with these managers, and endorsed by them, before being communicated to the workers. By working with existing authority figures, NCF has found the plantation workers to be receptive to its efforts, and the latter have experienced a greater level of safety than earlier.

Pass-a? Fail-a?

As described in the previous sections, the care work (affective labour) that NCF has engaged in to construct a safer mixed community has been fruitful because it builds on socially accepted modes of conduct that emphasise how individuals must act with restraint and obedience. However, negative encounters resulting in human injuries and deaths continue to occur occasionally. These events cause significant emotional and ethical turmoil in the conservationists - both from NCF and the ADS.

As Anand shared, "You will start doubting your own research '…what am I working on, writing here, making statements in a report?' We think that coexistence matters a lot because we are so interested in wildlife. But when you encounter a person whose life and entire family is ruined, that's where you start questioning yourself – this is where you need to be very [ethically] vigilant …" All the conservationists we spoke to felt some degree of moral responsibility for the safety of the residents of Valparai. When there is a negative human-elephant encounter, they spend considerable time investigating it to check if there was any lapse in alerting the residents or in responding to a distress call. Even when local opinion suggests that the individual may have been careless or panic-stricken and hence taken some action that put them at risk, the conservationists feel distressed because whatever the causal factors, the untimely loss of a human life is still tragic and it leaves what philosophers term, a 'moral residue' in the form of grief and/or a sense of helplessness.

For instance, between 2024 and 2025, two people died when an elephant visited the housing colonies and instead of remaining indoors, they rushed out in fright and got trampled upon. As Anand admits, "Assuming nobody wants to die, we have to ask [ourselves] why did this person not make the right decision?" He goes on to reflect that to fix any shortcomings in an intervention, conservationists have to go beyond the outcome (which is that it failed) and ask themselves *how* it failed because that detail will help to improve the mitigation effort. Sometimes, these deaths are due to what Anand terms 'a lack of safety at home' i.e., perhaps there are insufficient street lights near the housing colonies or there is no access to an indoor toilet and therefore people step out in the dark or the house is an isolated spot and the person did not receive the alerts on time. NCF does take up some of these issues although they lie more in the domain of rural development than wildlife conservation - in Hassan, for instance, Anand's team used a GPS to map the location of 173 non-functioning streetlights in areas used by elephants, so that they could petition the Collector to repair these and improve public safety. Here again, are the acts of tinkering.

Overall, being people who are concerned about both human and elephant communities, the conservationists in this team feel an equal sense of responsibility when members of either community are injured or they die. Therefore, a sense of moral residue is an inescapable part of their work. As a recent essay on ethics in conservation (Batavia et al 2020) acknowledges, "[...] in a multiple-use context it is impossible to achieve every objective in every action. [And therefore] trade-offs leave a moral residue.[...] To recognise residue is to recognise the human capacity

for care often exceeds the capacity for action. [...] between the poles of pure moral triumph and abject moral failure is an extensive gray zone in which even defensible decisions carry some moral cost." It is precisely this zone that the conservationists of Valparai inhabit, and a significant part of their affective labour goes towards managing the tension between these ideals and residues of care. In their case, there is no easy answer to the question the theatre artists posed to the estate workers i.e., "*Pass-a? Fail-a?*" We take a deeper look at these dimensions in Chapters 6 and 7, which focus on the work of the frontline ADS staff as well as NCF's own team.

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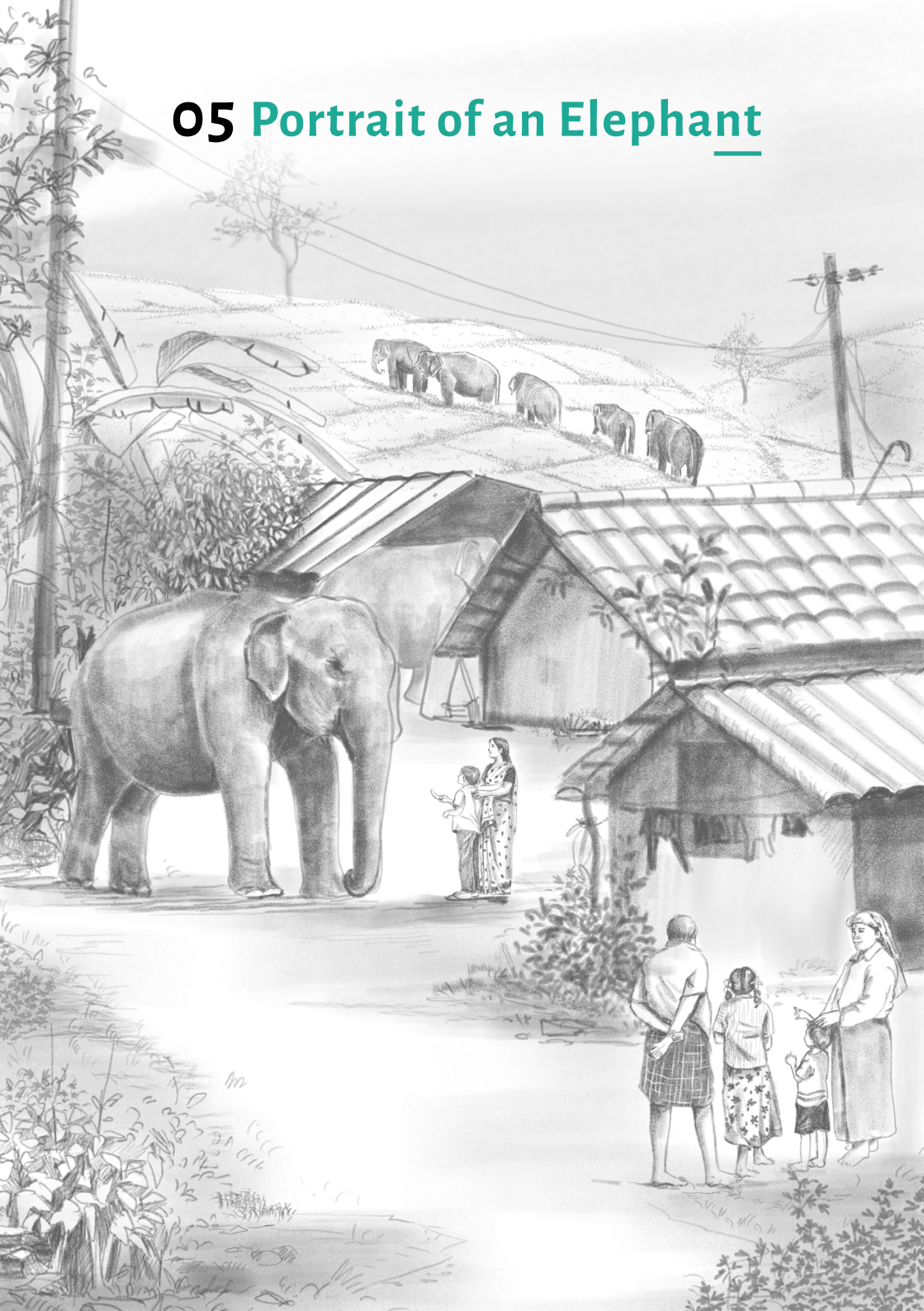
05 Portrait of an Elephant



As we mentioned in Chapter 1, influenced by the work of primatologists who had shown that individual animals had personalities and this influenced their social interactions, Anand set out to verify if this held true for elephants. In his doctoral work, he paid careful attention to the different ways in which individual elephants interacted with humans. In subsequent years, others in the NCF team and the ADS have also learned to identify some of the typical behavioural traits of individuals as well as herds and based on these, they are often able to predict when an interaction would remain calm or when it would escalate into conflict. For example, in Chapter 3, we described how the ADS used their knowledge of the temperament of the Vagamalai herd - as irritable, quick to react to disturbances - to identify them from a distance and warn the settlement people living nearby. Or how the tusker Bhima, due to his calm and majestic bearing, had acquired a large fan following in the Hassan landscape.

Similarly, while conducting fieldwork in Valparai, we heard many references to an elephant, a matriarch, called Monica - it was evident that she was a well-known and well-remembered personality because although she died in 2018, both conservationists and residents still spoke about her. We pieced together these anecdotes and perspectives in an effort to understand what makes an elephant charismatic and to trace how people's way of relating to such charismatic nonhumans might change over time (see also Shankar Raman, 2013; Frank and Suma 2025). As mentioned in Chapter 1, some of these perspectives and explanations may seem like anthropomorphism i.e., attribution of human characteristics to nonhumans. But it may not be entirely misplaced in the case of sentient, intelligent species such as elephants. Moreover, as Sayan Banerjee and Anindya Sinha (2023; pg 80) observe from their study of local people's understanding of elephant behaviour in Assam, anthropomorphising not only allows people to understand elephants "as fellow compatriots in a shared world but also [allows] people to reflect on their own lives, destined to be intertwined with elephants across time." In this chapter, we present a portrait of Monica, who although not calm, was certainly special to the people of Valparai.

Making a mark

Monica was one of the individuals identified and named by Anand during his fieldwork in 2002 - 2003. She was part of a herd that was locally (in) famous as "*bayangara damage panra kootam*" [a group that causes a lot of damage]. But true to his nomenclatural principles, he gave her a neutral name, after the estate in which he saw her first - the Monica Tea Estate which was established in the early 1900s. He recalls with a chuckle, that

one day, he had gotten out of his jeep and was watching Monica graze in the Korangumudi area when she became agitated and started moving towards them. As per protocol, he and his colleague got into the jeep and started the engine. That did not deter Monica and she continued to move towards the jeep at quite a pace. As they were deciding to drive away slowly, she suddenly put on a spurt of speed and tore off the back door. They had no choice but to accelerate and drive away, with hearts beating fast over that close encounter.

All the senior conservationists remember her and her family well because they experienced a steep learning curve in dealing with this herd. As Ganesh put it, "[Monica] gave us many things." When they begin to reminisce about the Monica herd, conservationists usually begin with a tragic incident that occurred about twenty years ago and the rest of Monica's life is often narrated as an act of recovering against all odds. The incident involved the death of two calves: It appears that the herd entered a shed in which sacks of fertilisers had been stored. Two of the calves consumed some of the fertiliser and got poisoned. When they died, the conservationists felt that it would be a long time before the herd recovered because all members of the herd, not only the mother, collectively invest a lot of time and energy in raising calves. For instance, the gestation period alone is 18 to 22 months.

Typically, a herd which suffered such serious losses would either 'fission' i.e., break up and join other larger herds, or the mother would take another 5-6 years to calve again. Moreover, they are also known to avoid places which they associate with pain, fear or other negative experiences. However, according to Abraham from the ADS, Monica and her herd continued to "deliberately move across the same areas" even after this incident. Senior Daniel still recalls how he rushed to the field a few years later, when a colleague called to tell him that the herd had entered the plateau and Monica seemed to have a calf with her. His reaction then and the sentimental tone in which he recalled this incident indicate that even for a seasoned conservationist like him, Monica's arrival with a calf was more than a milestone in population growth - his sense of care converted this moment of routine species reproduction into a celebratory, personal one. From our interviews, it became clear that from the perspective of the conservationists, this became the defining characteristic of Monica and her family - the ability to recover from a setback and face up to a threat.

They often shared a second anecdote to drive home this point about the stubborn resilience of the herd. Earlier, people used to light flaming torches to chase away elephants and once when the Monica herd got too close to a housing line, the residents decided to do the same. Initially,

Monica herself was nervous and fidgety when she saw these flaming torches. But on later occasions, the conservationists noticed that she had lost her fear of fire and no longer changed her path. The herd too learned from her. Abraham shared an incident to illustrate how Monica liked to make a point: "They [the Monica herd] could easily walk past a line of people holding torches because they lost their fear of fire long ago. But once, she turned aside to where a few torches [branches] were lying on the ground, still on fire, and she threw some mud on those sticks and stamped on them - [That day] people understood clearly that these elephants were not afraid of the torches." As we mentioned in Chapter 1, it is not unusual for elephants to learn to overcome various types of barriers since they are good problem-solvers but it is this level of *intentionality* in her interactions that set Monica apart and made her unforgettable.

Teaching moments

By 2009 or so, Anand began to see Monica spending a lot of time on her own, sometimes with only her calf around her. He initially thought this was due to a leg injury that might have prevented her from keeping up with the rest of the herd. But even after her leg healed, she remained solitary for extended periods of time. This was very interesting behaviour because until then, biologists had believed that female elephants *always* lived in groups and only sub-adult or adult males lived on their own. Through extended observations, Anand and his team found that a few other females, in other herds too, became solitary with age so this may not have been a behaviour peculiar to Monica. However, she was the first to alert them to this possibility.

Anand speculates that Monica may have been 'middle-aged' by then and her teeth may have worn out due to which she grazed in swampy areas and began targeting the housing lines and ration shops frequently - they contained easily consumable foods such as rice and sugar. Ganesh added that the younger males of the herd may have learnt from her, to look for food inside buildings. On a few occasions they were seen opening latches on doors and windows and sniffing inside, probably for edible items. He also mused aloud that long after she became solitary and began to spend most of her time on a hill, "...all the other members of the herd, including the ones who were small boys under her, they came and touched her with their trunks [every now and then]. It was like that scene in the movie Godfather… the hand-kissing scene"(see also Douglas-Hamilton et al 2006). This reiterated to Ganesh the long-lasting influence a matriarch has over all members of the herd, including the male calves she helps to care for during the early years.

Abraham says Monica was the first to discover that the walls themselves were consumable. As he followed her around, he observed that she would eat fragments of the walls themselves before raiding the broken house. This behaviour really puzzled him and as he began investigating it further, he came to know that jaggery was often added to the lime mortar in the estate line houses to improve their durability. Monica's sharp sense of smell had detected these ingredients! He remembers it as a salutary moment of learning for him because even though he had been born and brought up in Valparai, he did not know this until Monica directed his attention.

Anand had yet another anecdote about learning from Monica. From their long-term observations, his team discovered that although the Monica herd was not deterred from their house-breaking by the use of flaming torches, they tended to avoid buildings which had fairy lights or LED bulbs strung along their facade. He speculates that the flickering light emitted by these somehow made Monica and the herd nervous, so they left such buildings alone. He leveraged this insight to protect a medical compounder's house in Iyerpadi: the Monica herd had damaged the building several times in the past and finally, one season, Anand and Ganesh advised them to string fairy lights across - it worked! This incident once again tells us how knowing the quirks of individual elephants or herds helps conservationists to tinker meaningfully with their practices of care and mitigate conflict.

Signature style

The Monica herd also displayed a 'signature style' in terms of *how* they broke walls and caused property damage. The first feature was that they did it in broad daylight. Most elephants rest in the forest fragments during the day and come near the housing colonies only at dawn or dusk. Therefore, the conservationists' usual routine was to patrol different areas from 7 to 11 am. Then they would return home, have their first meal of the day and rest. At 4 pm or so, they would set out for their night patrols. But whenever the Monica herd entered the Valparai plateau, their routine would be thrown into total disarray because they would get frantic calls from people at 10 or 11 am, reporting breakage of walls.

Secondly, while most herds tended to break just one or two houses in a line, Abraham claims you could trace this herd's path by following an entire trail of broken houses. Moreover, after pulling down the building, Monica and others would strew the stones and beams around widely. Ganesh gestured with his hands, "If we gather all the stones, it would be a very small pile. But the way it was scattered around the house, we

would feel a *big* building had been destroyed. But no, it is only a small house." As we mentioned earlier, when Monica made a point, she did it with dramatic flair.

Moreover, they claim this herd "used to move like lightning" and could cover in a few hours distances that most other herds would take days to traverse. According to Abraham, this caused administrative headaches because earlier, the ADS teams of different ranges worked quite independently of each other and did not have a common platform to share real-time information. However, once the Monica herd began to zigzag across ranges at a great pace, often breaking houses along the way, the ADS teams began to systematically use WhatsApp groups to communicate with each other. Abraham says, "she made both the ranges [Valparai and Manamboli] speak and work together. We cannot keep anything for tomorrow [as with Monica] everything happens on that day itself." Monica injected a great deal of liveness into the mitigators' routines.

The always-here elephant

One would not expect that a destructive presence such as Monica would be recalled with affection by the residents of Valparai (especially given the narratives of fear of elephants in general that we described in Chapter 3) but oddly enough, that is indeed the case. One of the common adjectives that people used in their reminiscences was *'ingiyae irukkara yaanai*' i.e., the always-here elephant. As we mentioned earlier, Anand and Ganesh found that as she aged, Monica spent increasing amounts of time by herself and close to settlements where she could find easily consumable food. This made her a very familiar presence to people, and they seem to have begun to accept her almost as another local resident, in contrast to other herds which they refer to as "coming and going from Kerala side." People appeared to have become so accustomed to her presence that they described encounters like neighbours crossing paths: "when I was coming there, that elephant had already gone inside [a forest fragment]; it came outside just to see me." The speculation about when and through which path Monica would come near their houses and cause damage seems to have evaporated once she became an *always-here* elephant. In contrast to the conservationists, public memory seems to have largely preserved this phase of Monica's personality and not the earlier fearsome one they tried to drive away with fire torches.

Other common ways we heard people describing Monica were 'the standing still', sleepyhead (*thoongumoonji*) and deaf elephant. For instance, an elderly lady who used to be a tea plucker recalled, "That

elephant never let us proceed with our work." She continued "If an elephant comes, we tell forest [department] people, we tell [estate] supervisors … if it breaks our house, we tell them to repair it speedily, but this elephant just stands there, without doing anything, then how can we do our work [of the day]?" In this phase, Monica seems to have interrupted the work-day sequence of residents rather than the ADS. Another person revealed how keenly residents notice elephant behaviour when he commented, "All elephants, even when they are standing in one place, swing their trunk, move their tail, stamp their legs on the ground… but this elephant did nothing and stood still like a rock." Her quiet presence seems to have puzzled people and hence made a strong impression on them. They probably also felt more emboldened by her lack of reaction to their proximity because it appears that they began to feed her in the later years. Some claimed they gave her jackfruit and watermelon, some said they even gave raw rice and sugar. When we probed, people often said when the elephant had passed through the previous estate, they fed her "so we felt we too should give her something."

However, they admitted that Monica did not consume the food, she would just touch it with the tip of her trunk, play around with it a bit and leave it alone. "If offered food, even a stone elephant would eat, wouldn't it? That elephant, however, was not like that." Sometimes that elephant would just open its eyes to see the food and then close its eyes, go back to sleep."

People, in general, and women working in estates, in particular, seem to strongly believe that elephants come to their houses in search of food - that it was not available to them in the forest, and hence we humans must not chase them away when they eat our rice and sugar. Local beliefs seem to indicate that not only elephants, but all forms of life, are connected by a common sense of hunger. And hence a fundamental act of caring for others involves giving them food and such an extension of empathy lies at the heart of what it means to be human (see Chapter 3 for similar sentiments in Valparai and Keil 2025 for accounts from Assam).

The ageing *singari*

Another way in which the people we spoke to, especially the older women, seemed to make sense of Monica's behaviour in later years was to invoke a familiar trope of the ageing parent who is neglected by her children. "That deaf elephant was left alone by its family…The younger ones abandoned her, as our [human] children do…" Monica came to be called *singari* in this solitary, mellowed phase of her life. The word *singari* is usually used to denote a well-dressed woman who is aware of the impression her beauty creates and hence walks proudly. In the

context of the hard lives of the women tea pluckers, especially in earlier times, on their weekly day off—on Sundays—they would dress up in their best clothes, in bright colours, to go into town to attend church, buy groceries or run other errands. This marked a stark contrast to their everyday workwear which normally consists of three layers of garments - a long skirt and man's shirt over which they wear a thick resin sheet and a thin plastic sheet, lined with a jute or cotton sheet. These layers protect their skin from sharp twigs, thorns and harsh weather. They also carry netted bags and other tools to pluck tea leaves. Overall, their workwear is normally dull coloured, wet and soiled, since they spend long hours outdoors. Their Sunday clothes marked a welcome break in terms of both routine and attire. Hence when they use the term *singari* for Monica, they do it to mark this departure from the normal - as an elephant that looks and behaves differently and therefore, attracts attention. (For more on the influence of gender on human-elephant interactions, see Banerjee and Sinha 2023).

Mourning Monica

As we mentioned earlier, people's memories of Monica stand in contrast to the conservationists because they seem to recall the quieter phase of the latter's life more vividly. Secondly, they seem to either recognise elephants as particular individuals or not at all - they are rarely able to associate an elephant with the herd and its characteristics. Therefore, when Monica died in 2018, people seem to have mourned her as *their-own* Monica rather than as the bold matriarch of an unruly herd. Ganesh shook his head in bewilderment as he told us how workers took leave from their estates, foregoing an entire day of wages, to place garlands on her body and mourn her passing - some of the very same people may have waved flaming torches or burst firecrackers to scare her away in the early years. Nevertheless, to mourn her passing was also an act of care.

As he describes it, Monica died on a hill from the injuries she sustained after being gored by a male elephant. Monica died with her customary dramatic flair and people were moved by the spectacle. Abraham suggests that although not everyone may be kind to an elephant, there is something about the death of such a sentient animal that humbles us - it makes us ask, "what is in this life and what are we living for?" And hence he believes no one can witness such a scene and remain unmoved.

As this portrait of Monica's life suggests, some elephant personalities are larger-than-life and they draw people into their orbit. The way people care for elephants can also change through the different phases of an

elephant's life: as a calf it might be greeted with affection and unqualified welcome, as an adult with fearful empathy, and as a 'senior citizen' with compassionate acceptance. It is hard to explain people's relations to elephants in purely logical terms. For instance, Anand has another interesting nugget on how some years ago in Hassan, the Karnataka Forest Department decided to capture and translocate a few elephants in response to a huge public outcry over human mortalities and property damage. One of the elephants they had identified for the translocation was Bhima (see Chapter 3). When local people came to know of the decision to translocate Bhima, they staged a bandh and appeared in a televised debate with the Forest Department, to passionately argue that "some other elephant should be moved out but not our Bhima." In general, as filmmaker Kalyan Varma in his documentary film, translocation is a traumatic process for elephants and often a risky, morally distressing experience for the humans involved (see also Fernando et al 2012, Vijayakrishnan 2024, Bates et al 2025 for ineffectiveness and impact of translocation). But what was remarkable about this incident was the people's efforts to protect one particular elephant with whom they felt a strong sense of connection that is encapsulated in the words "our Bhima." To return to Valparai, a final unique feature of the narratives we heard was that very few people invoked the elephants-as-gods metaphor that is usually heard across India (for contrasting perspectives see Keil 2025; Thekaekara et al 2021). As we described in Chapter 4, there is clearly a wide range of affects evoked in these encounters, some of which foster a sense of care and others which do not, but taken together affective relations significantly shape how elephants and humans interact. Therefore, the larger goal of facilitating interspecies sociality and attending to the wellbeing of both is as important as attending to the minutiae of managerial interventions.

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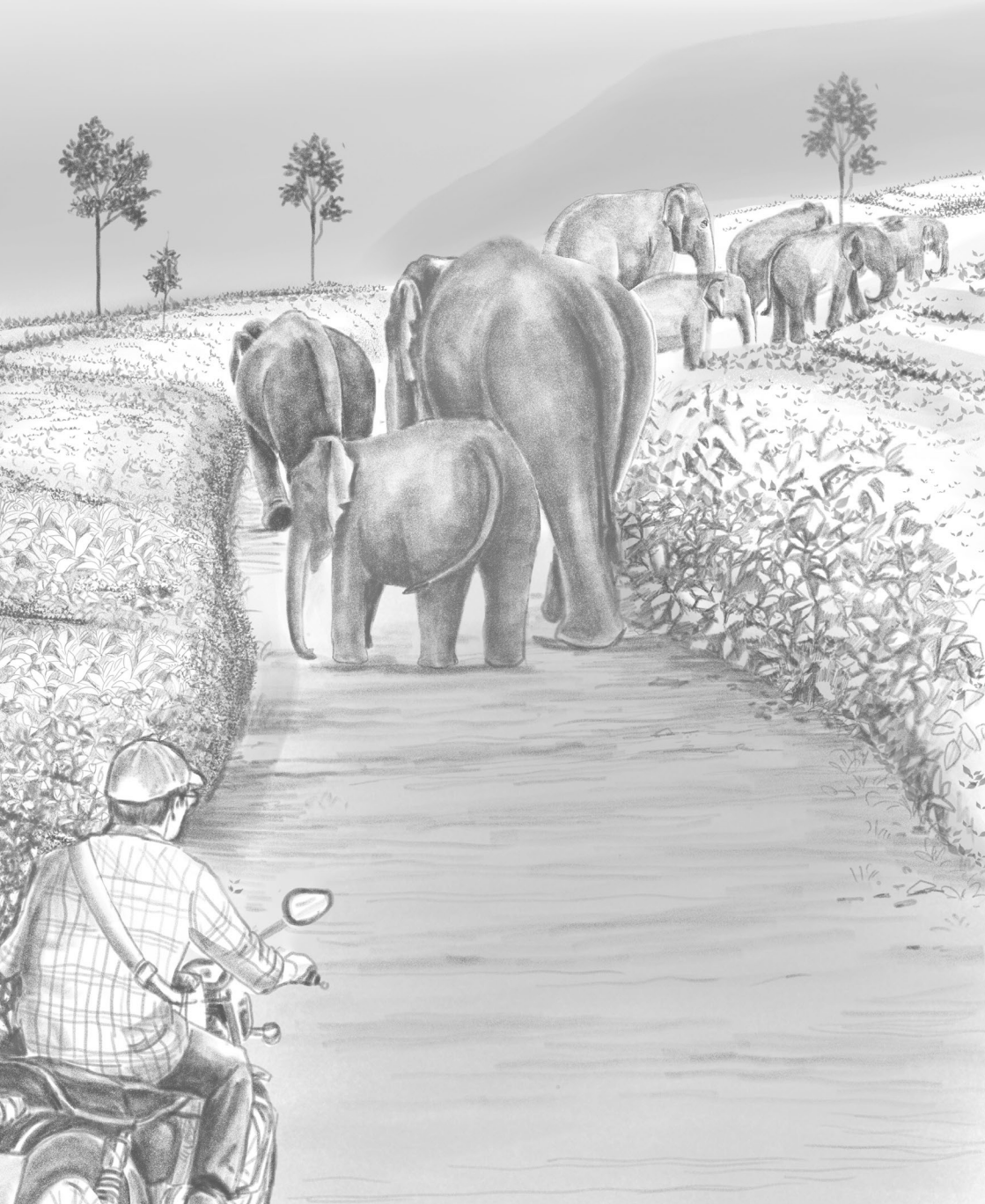
06 Working In-Between



The Valparai plateau is administered by two range offices of the Anamalai Tiger Reserve - the Manamboli Range and the Valparai Range. Going by the posters of rare plants and endangered wildlife that are commonly displayed on the walls of such offices, we may think the forest department focuses entirely on the management of mysterious nonhumans. However, if we spend a little more time there, our impressions may change. For instance, we may meet estate managers and workers who have come to the range office to complain about some tree's branches being cut without permission, or boulders being extracted from their property for use in construction by some unknown persons. Or we may notice large bundles of letters, requesting or granting permission, to lay roads and water pipes, erect electricity poles and transport construction material beyond forest check posts. We may even overhear a call or two reporting that a herd of gaur are feeding at the municipal waste dump, can the department drive them away? The mosaic nature of the Valparai landscape—with its mixture of forest fragments, plantations and settlements—means that forest and wildlife matters constantly overflow onto civic matters and vice versa. This is the reality of living in Valparai and therefore, much of the routine work of a forest office is not very different from that of a municipal office. Here again, binary views of nature and culture get undone everyday and in the most mundane of ways.

The Anti-Depredation Squad

Just as the range offices of the forest department in Valparai do more than manage the forest, the Anti-Depredation Squad (ADS) too does more than prevent loss of property or life. Most of their work in the plateau is in fact, pro-active: They work in the interface between people and wildlife to foster coexistence and mitigate conflict (see Chapter 3). As mentioned earlier, similar to other conservationists in Valparai, one of their core beliefs is that both people and wildlife are rightful inhabitants of the plateau and neither should be excluded either as 'an agent of depredation' nor as an 'encroacher.' But, due to the earlier history of exclusionary conservation, the average resident of Valparai still commonly views conservationists in general and the forest department in particular, as those who prioritise the life of nonhumans over the interests of local people. Therefore, such residents tend to view any work related to wildlife as inherently opposed to their own welfare. As people in the frontlines, members of the ADS still encounter the consequences of this historical bias. Hence, they frequently feel the pressure to demonstrate that it is possible to create a small patch of middle ground. As they acknowledged, they must carefully avoid 'taking sides' and speaking for the one at the cost of the other - they must consciously work *in-between* wildlife and people.

Their duties are expansive because in addition to elephants, there are a pantheon of species that could precipitate some form of human-wildlife conflict in Valparai - lion-tailed macaques, gaur, leopards, sloth bears, etc. The ADS is involved in mitigating these conflicts too. Moreover, when any wild animal is injured or dies close to human habitation, the ADS is called to investigate the incident. Conversely, when a human dies in an encounter with a wild animal and the corpse is not found, the ADS is once again called for the search operation. Sometimes the members are required to translate people's perspectives to the forest department or the department's perspective to the people.

In the context of human-elephant relations, their role is to watch and predict elephant movements and based on those predictions, alert the people in the corresponding area. Beyond this, conflict mitigators get frequent calls from people about elephant movements near their homes and workplaces. On receiving these calls, the mitigators swiftly visit those locations to pacify those who are worried, as well as to discourage the bolder ones from chasing away the elephants. Basically, the ADS try to ensure the safe passage of elephants through the landscape and simultaneously, try to safeguard people's lives and properties from the elephants. As Ganesh mentioned earlier (in Chapter 3), they try to smooth the rough edges of encounters.

Inward and outward dimensions of care

In the Valparai and Manamboli ranges, the ADS was created in 2014. It is staffed entirely by men, recruited from the local population and employed on a contract basis i.e., as temporary workers. They often join as boys who have recently completed their schooling or a diploma course, and some may stay on, for more than two decades. Therefore, the senior-most members of the ADS, although still categorised as temporary workers, may, in many instances, be more experienced than permanent employees such as a Forester or Range Officer. Moreover, while the persons in the permanent positions are transferred to other locations, the ADS members remain rooted in the local landscape. Therefore, as the Range Officers and Foresters openly admit, it is essential to take the advice of senior members of the ADS when managing conflicts with wildlife because the latter have a long-term understanding of context and are respected by the residents of Valparai. One important reason is that most ADS members are allocated residences in the line-houses, next to the estate workers. These line-houses are physically vulnerable to elephant-induced damage and therefore the ADS members' willingness to occupy the same physically vulnerable conditions as the average person adds considerable weight to their claim of working at the interface of human-

elephant encounters. From our extended conversations, it appears that ADS members consider the following aspects as central to their work:

1. *Profiling elephants and people:* Identifying, counting and tracking elephants forms a major part of their work. The ADS particularly watch over people whose houses and workplaces are close to elephant paths; people who frequently travel during dawn and dusk; and men who tend to walk outside at night in an inebriated state, etc. By profiling elephants and people, ADS members are able to anticipate when negative encounters may occur and try to prevent these.

2. *Searching for elephant-related photos:* In many instances, senior officers call upon the ADS to share a picture of a particular elephant or herd and describe their recent encounters with people. ADS members perceive this as both a fun-filled exercise as well as a tense one because the ability to identify an elephant is an essential component of demonstrating one's competency and if they fail to find and send the required photo, their entire body of work gets questioned.

3. *Speaking to people:* ADS members need to create and maintain a good rapport with different social groups in Valparai so that people volunteer relevant information freely and heed their advice in a crisis. Hence a considerable portion of their time goes in speaking to people about elephants and other matters of local interest.

4. *Offering assistance:* Another important though informal activity through which ADS members maintain rapport is by offering people rides in their vehicles. As they are constantly on the road, many of them make it a point to inform other residents of their movements so that they can ask for 'a lift' when required. At dawn and dusk in particular, ADS members offer rides to women or the elderly, so that they can reach their destinations safely - another small example of tinkering which is in some ways, the converse of the micro-practices through which other motorists show care for elephants (see Chapter 3).

5. *Providing mutual support:* If any of the ADS members themselves experience a sad or unpleasant interaction with other residents, or even with the higher officials in the forest department, they rely on their colleagues for moral support. Witnessing the extensive damages, injuries or deaths caused by a negative wildlife encounter and the attendant distress of survivors takes an emotional toll on them - as mentioned in Chapter 4, conservationists working on the

> frontlines of coexistence are particularly vulnerable to the burden of moral residue since it is difficult to do justice to both sides at all times. In such situations, the brotherly camaraderie of the ADS plays a crucial role in helping the member cope with the situation.

As you may have noted, these components of the ADS' work include both formal and informal aspects and the care they extend is directed both outwards (to elephants and other residents) as well as inwards (to their colleagues). Overall, it is clear that the ADS too engage in the affective labour required to construct and maintain a form of interspecies sociality that will enable the coexistence of people and elephants.

Of mobiles...

ADS members can never be seen without their mobile phones. If you could convince one of them to show you their WhatsApp messages, more than half would simply be images of elephants. Many of these are shared across a WhatsApp group that the ADS members created a few years ago: it is called *Thadam* (which means path or track). It also has some members of the public and in terms of geographic coverage, it covers all the estates in the landscape as well as a few other localities. At first, this group was created to alert people about elephant movement in a particular location, as predicted by the ADS members' tracking and profiling of different herds. But eventually, other members of the public also began contributing information in the form of photographs of elephants they had seen during their daily commute or near their homes or workplaces. Hence *Thadam* changed from being a platform for dissemination to a platform for two-way communication.

The mobile phone plays a crucial role in helping the ADS calm people down during human-elephant encounters at night, especially when they occur near the housing lines. Because in such situations, the probability of someone rushing out of their house in panic or inadvertently running towards a herd are high. Therefore, the ADS' first priority on getting a distress call is to calm people down over the phone and then, ask questions that would help them identify the individual elephant or herd. Once they are able to identify the elephants, they are also able to predict what might happen, based on their own understanding of the personalities of the elephants involved, and guide people accordingly. For instance, Senior Daniel (whom we met in Chapter 3) might tell the caller, "These elephants will not do anything, but you must not gather outside in a crowd. Just stay inside, if they try to break down the house from one side don't run out through the other side of the house because the rest of the herd may be there. You can bang your kitchen utensils and

raise the volume of your TV, they will leave." Or for another herd, they may tell the caller, "These elephants will just scratch their head against the walls and doors, they never break into a house, so stay inside your house." For some herds, they will merely say "Just go back to sleep, this elephant will leave in 5-10 minutes." Hence the immediacy of connection that is offered by the mobile phone enables the ADS to metaphorically place themselves in-between as mitigators, even before they physically reach the site of the encounter. It allows them to offer calibrated care in the form of these specific instructions about how people should respond to the presence of elephants near them.

In recent years, ADS members have noticed that the calls they get from some youngsters are of a different register. Both Senior and Young Daniel shared an example of how these calls would typically go: "*Anna* [elder brother], the XYZ elephant group - you shared their photo in the WhatsApp group recently. It is standing on the other side of our houses … you don't need to come here, we know they will not do anything, they will go along our homes and into the forest fragment on the other side. You sleep, I called just to inform you." Senior Daniel explains it this way, "People are getting accustomed to hearing the names of individual elephants, and they are able to identify the elephant from its appearance, when it comes to the same landscape in consecutive years."

One of the reasons for this shift is that ADS members don't only post messages that function as alerts. They use the *Thadam* group as an archive or logbook because each season, they post information about when particular herds entered and exited the plateau. Therefore, when they scroll back, they have a longitudinal picture of herd movement over several seasons. This tacitly educates other people on the WhatsApp group about the seasonality of elephant presence, and the ADS members feel that it helps people to appreciate elephants as rightful inhabitants who have life paths of their own, rather than viewing them solely as actors who appear suddenly and create conflict. Knowing the names, life histories and paths of elephants renders them familiar and blunts the fear experienced in an encounter. Sometimes this may evoke curiosity or acceptance as in the case of the caller above.

However, as Senior and Young Daniel both pointed out, this creates a different type of risk. They said "We cannot let the casual, taken-for-granted attitude of people, especially the youth, lull us [into thinking everything will be fine]. Even when they [such callers] identify the elephant's name and predict their movement correctly, everyone must do certain things irrespective of whether you know the elephant or not." So, they repeat the same instructions as they would give to a distressed caller, to keep them safe. As we explained in Chapter 3, both extreme fear

and the lack of it cause problems and mitigators have to strike a balance in what affect their messages evoke in people: if they are not able to calm people down sufficiently, there could be a negative encounter triggered by panic. Conversely, if they overly boost people's confidence in dealing with the situation, carelessness could also lead to a negative encounter. As Mohan (in Chapter 3) stated, there is an implicit decorum that people need to maintain when dealing with elephants.

... And mobility

Apart from mobile phones, another important tool the ADS members rely on are their two- or four-wheelers. They constantly crisscross the landscape on their bikes, to physically track different herds as well as build the social networks that are so important to their mitigation work. For instance, during one of our conversations, Senior Daniel instructed Young Daniel to visit a couple of localities on his bike, through a specific route, at different times during the day and again visit the same localities once in the evening with the jeep. Then he turned to us and explained that this was to demonstrate to the residents there, that the ADS "exists for them."

Young Daniel later shared with us that access to mobiles, bikes and jeeps were perceived as badges of office - people believed only those with such gadgets were serious about mitigating conflict and could do an efficient job. He felt if an ADS member went to people's homes, without a bike, his sincerity would be doubted. Young Daniel said, "People do not say 'Send him, he is good at chasing away elephants from our locality'. Instead, they say 'Ask them [the ADS] to bring lights, let a couple of your people come from that side in a bike, and you come from this side in a jeep'."

Young Daniel began to gesture and mimic how people identify the ADS and speak about them: "If that person comes by bike, it means he is just going to check the presence of elephants, not to chase them away; If they come in a jeep, they are going to chase away the elephants for certain; Is he the person I spoke to last night? His voice sounds different" and so on. What Young Daniel's observations tell us is that to the public eye at least, these techno-material aspects are important markers of the competence of ADS members as well as tangible evidence that the forest department here cares for both people *and* elephants.

His comments reminded us of the essays on humanity, science and technology by the scholar Donna Haraway (2013) - she coined the term 'cyborg' to describe how humanity has historically been enmeshed with technology, from primitive to more advanced forms, and how these have led to new forms of social life and identity. Haraway's work is of renewed

interest to us because it is work that invites reflection rather than outright rejection of technological advances. It stands in contrast to much of the recent literature on biodiversity conservation which takes an overly critical view of the role of technology - in simplified terms, technology is often described as an instrument of surveillance that is used by the powerful against the powerless or as a disruptor of harmonious relations because it alienates people from their natural environment. While we agree that technology can indeed be misused and poorly regulated, we suggest that it is not the entire story. For instance, as these voices from Valparai suggest, technology can be used in constructive ways as well, such as to facilitate public participation, foster coexistence, or even extend care to those who are physically distant (also see Lorimer et al 2019, Turnbull et al 2023, Sheard et al 2024 for other examples).

To return to the ADS, it is not only people who conflate them with their techno-material presence - even elephants do. For instance, Senior Daniel explained to us how an automobile mediates their interaction with elephants: "That elephant used to identify me; it would stand and graze calmly after observing me for a few minutes. But, suddenly, one day, it began to charge at me. I did not know why. Much later, I came to know that the elephant was charging at the jeep I was travelling in because someone from our group had used the same jeep earlier to chase that elephant. So that elephant came to charge at the jeep, not me. When I used another jeep, that elephant was calm." He went on to point out how, even while chasing an elephant, there are certain norms to be followed and when this person violated those norms, it affected how the elephant reacted to later encounters: Usually, ADS members slowly drive the jeep (or a borrowed van or tractor) behind an elephant to guide it into a forest patch. At these times, they will not accelerate or use the horn (remember the vehement *verattave maattom* declaration of the ADS in Chapter 3). Basically, they just follow the pace and rhythm of the elephant's walk and refrain from leading or hurrying it in any way. They stop their vehicle if the elephant stands still or when it turns back and looks at them. This reassures the elephant that they are not a threat, and it will peacefully move into the forest patch. Therefore, anything done in contrast to the norms above is considered vigorous and careless chasing rather than herding and it will inevitably make the elephant feel irritated at the person-in-the-vehicle.

Speech and silence as acts of care

If we shadowed an ADS member around for some days, we may find that in several instances, a herd of elephants may have peacefully left a locality in 10 minutes, but the ADS member lingers around and talks to people for a considerable length of time after. According to the ADS, this is important for maintaining rapport with different residents and without this sense of connection, people may not listen to them in a moment of crisis. As Senior Daniel put it, "[...] we must take due interest in their lives...they must not feel 'who is he to speak about our family'?" Hence, they don't hesitate to ask a mother about her rebellious son and promise to keep an eye on him; or caution a woman against giving her husband too much money because he was seen inebriated and staggering home in the dark; or inform a son about his elderly mother who goes into forest patches to collect firewood, even when an elephant alert has been sounded. All of this is done in a register of care and when combined with their willingness to be on call and physically present when there are elephants around, such injunctions become acceptable to other residents. But the effort required to get to such a position of influence is considerable - as Young Daniel declares dramatically, "Our legs become shortened, throat becomes dry, and [many] nights of sleep get sacrificed."

This sense of connection also comes to the rescue of the ADS themselves when they take a misstep on some occasions. As Vadivel acknowledged, "In some instances, we have spoken one or two harsh words, because we are human too - I have become tense, shouted or raised my hand [against someone else] in some instances. But people understand, they come and apologise to us the next day; if we feel we were wrong, we will also apologise." Consider another instance that was mentioned several times when the ADS members wished to highlight how charged and sensitive the moment of conflict mitigation could be: as we described earlier in Chapter 3, one night, they were called to a housing colony which had been surrounded by elephants. Just as they thought they had reassured everyone and convinced them to remain indoors, a 50-year-old man suddenly ran out in front of the elephants and shouted, "Kill me!" The ADS were at first startled by this but one of them reacted quickly and managed to pin the man to the ground before he got charged by an elephant. Eventually, the others managed to disperse the herd, and they saw the man safely back home, without anyone speaking a word that night. Nevertheless, the incident left them feeling very disturbed.

The next day, Senior Daniel took the young mitigator who had tackled the man, as well as a few others, to the same housing colony. There, the neighbours told the ADS that the man was a respected person in their

community, but he had been cheated of his savings and his adult children had refused to support him. This combination of financial and personal problems might have pushed him to act in such a risky manner the previous night. When the ADS entered the man's house, he sat there quiet and embarrassed. His family said nothing, probably because they felt guilty for adding to his troubles. The young mitigator too was speechless because in daylight, he could see that the man was old enough to be his father and by tackling such a person and pinning them to the ground, he had been disrespectful even though he had done it to save the man's life. They all sat in silence for some time and then left.

Senior Daniel believes that it was essential for them to visit the person and sit silently in that guilt-ridden and unwelcoming house in order to mend that interpersonal relation; that the silence helped both, the family and the young mitigator, realise the consequences of their actions. As several members of the ADS agreed, what begins as a conflict between elephants and people can turn, in a second, to a conflict between the ADS and other people. Hence the work of conflict mitigation is not only an act of caring for *interspecies* relations but inevitably also an act of caring about *interpersonal* relations.

Rewards of care

Young Daniel was particularly forthcoming about what he perceived as the rewards of care. To begin with, he candidly acknowledged that as someone who had grown up in one of the housing colonies, he had found the ADS glamorous - their bikes, jeeps, large torches and connections to researchers as well as the forest department attracted him. Later, it was the social status that came with his knowledge of elephants - the ability to casually identify an individual, outline its traits, name its family members and most of all, to follow it around without fear. In addition, there was the fun of predicting what a young elephant would do as it began to encounter ration shops, solar fences, people, buses and bikes… watching it develop its own unique personality. Here Senior Daniel interjected, "A lot of things keep on changing here, we think one thing and a completely different thing happens. This is what is important in this job, and for anyone to do this job, this way of understanding—why elephants change and what people have done—is a must. This is both interesting and a headache sometimes. It is what keeps me in this job happily, and it is what gives me a headache, too." Finally, there is also the satisfaction that comes with solving a puzzle and helping someone. Young Daniel playfully narrated an incident in the style of a detective story, to make his point. "There was an elephant that kept coming to a small shop even though it had no edible goods in it. The shop owner, a very old man,

complained repeatedly, so we went there [to investigate]. We could not figure out why the elephant was coming to his shop… Everyone else had asked that old man, "Do you have rice, jaggery or jackfruit in your shop?" He said "No, no, no!" But after some time [of carefully looking around], I found that he had stored a lot of jackfruit seeds in a container. That was the smell that had attracted the elephant! When I found those seeds, I was relieved and satisfied that I had done a good job… I told him to use them up immediately or throw them out. We help someone and feel happy, right? Now that old man likes me and always smiles at me whenever he sees me." Just as the practices of care—the tinkering and calibration—may often seem minor but are significant to the recipient of care, the rewards of care are equally subtle but significant to the caregiver.

Present continuous action

Many of the senior ADS members are familiar with how field research is carried out but are clear that conflict mitigation is *not* about data collection. This made us curious because data, in a generic sense, could mean a piece of information. But, according to Senior Daniel, data collection is almost antithetical to conflict mitigation because the latter involves placing oneself in the field, for a long period of time, and repeatedly dealing with the issues that come up. He argues that when researchers go to the field to collect data, their presence is temporary and thus they see only a slice of things - from the perspective of time spent, locations covered and most significantly, species of focus because they usually come to research either elephants or rarely, people. Although Senior Daniel made these observations in colloquial terms, he reminded us somewhat of our own experience of trying to talk across different research paradigms (see Chapter 1) i.e., broadly speaking, in the natural sciences, one seeks to be detached from the field and abstract data from the setting while in the social sciences, one seeks to immerse oneself in the field and contextualise data!

The way Senior Daniel and other ADS members describe their work seems to imply that an important skill in mitigation is the ability to *connect* the dots - across space, seasons and species. And they use terms such as 'tracking' and 'going on rounds' to emphasise that it is not a one-time activity; these are aspects they need to repeatedly engage with because the dots may connect up differently each time. According to them this notion of *doing*—what we have termed 'present continuous action'—is a key point of difference between their work and the work of researchers. They need to keep extending their presence, speaking to people, and speculating about elephant movements and behaviours. There is no sense of ending or closure given the dynamism of the interactions

between people and elephants. These routine repetitions and persistent tinkering in the field is a core aspect of how they articulate their sense of care.

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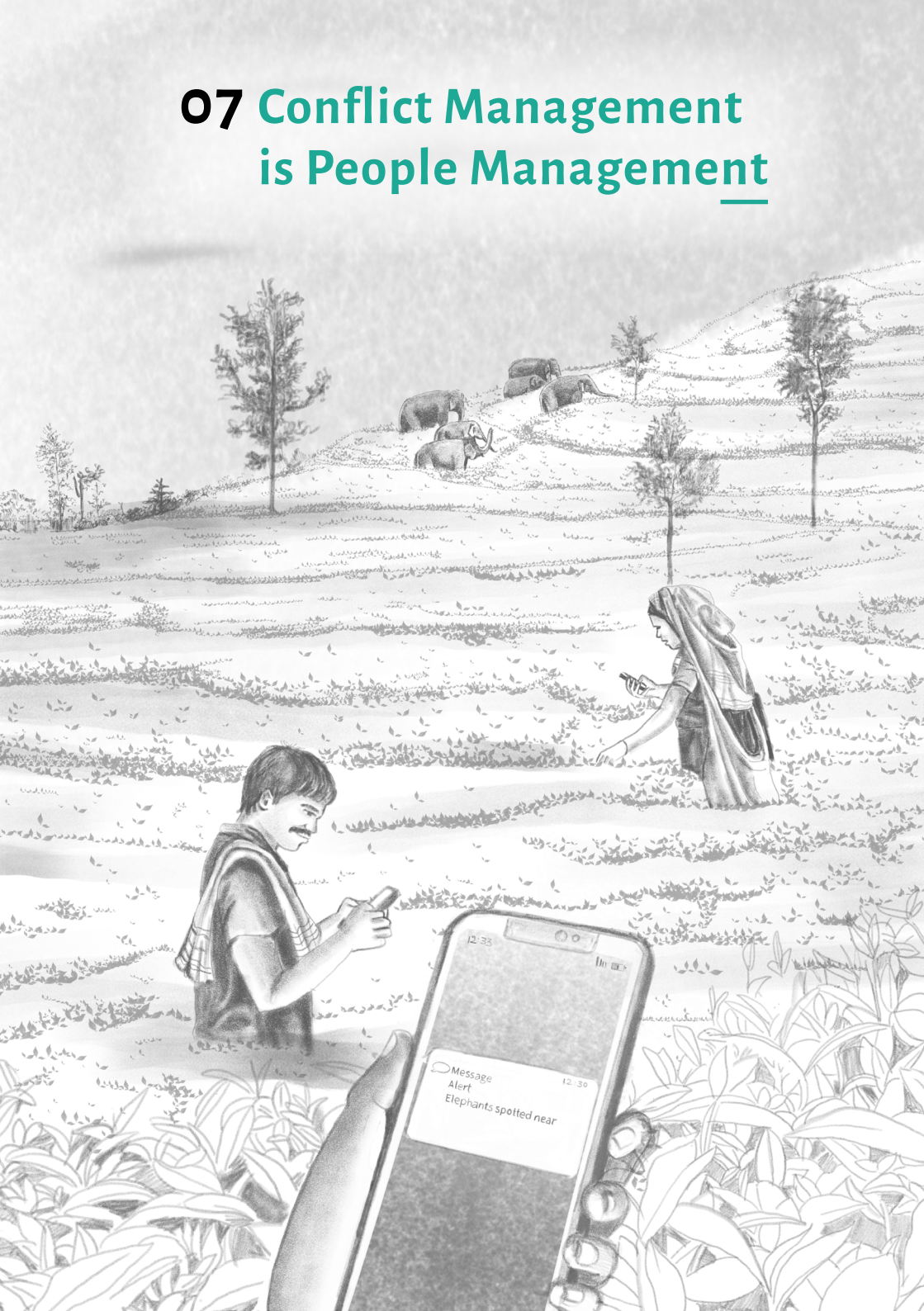
07 Conflict Management is People Management



In the previous chapter, (Chapter 6), we described the work and role of the ADS in managing the encounters between people and elephants in the Valparai plateau. Although their contribution is significant, it would be incomplete without the presence and practices of our colleagues from the Nature Conservation Foundation. Hence, we now turn your attention back to the story of Anand and his team: As we mentioned earlier (in Chapter 1), when people and elephants suddenly encounter each other, there is a moment of primeval fear on both sides (the fear of the unknown) and this can lead to panic-stricken reactions. And moreover, as we explained (in Chapter 3), Anand's study of elephant behaviour in 2002-07 indicated that if people and elephants could be kept at least 100m apart from each other (converting the fear of the unknown to fear of the known), it could drastically reduce injuries and mortality on both sides.

In this chapter, we provide a more detailed description of how the NCF team have positioned themselves with respect to other actors, incorporated systematic observations, experimented with different practices and leveraged existing social networks to nurture a sense of interspecies sociality in Valparai.

Accountability

To begin with, Anand believes that it is essential for mitigators to ask themselves hard questions such as, "Although we have enough data on elephants and their behaviours, why do we still struggle to manage conflicts? Why do some people take their lives for granted and venture too close to elephants? Who am I to tell people that they must coexist with elephants? How do I make myself answerable to them?" We could say that the common challenge these questions force the mitigators to face, is one of accountability – "How do we account for the elephant's presence in people's behaviours and the converse, how do we account for people's presence in the elephant's behaviour? And through it all, how do we hold ourselves accountable to both sides?" It is evident that these questions or dilemmas are not readily resolvable through the traditional tools of science, say an exhaustive literature review, a new methodology, or detailing a fresh argument. Instead, they need to be grappled with at the level of everyday, iterative practice. Even so, the answers may only be fleeting ones - appropriate for one moment or situation, but not the next. Nevertheless, these questions appear to be important in helping mitigators anchor themselves in a situation or landscape, and we heard them voiced in different ways by both NCF's own team as well as the ADS (see Chapter 6).

Attunement

Another cardinal principle in Anand's approach is that mitigators should develop an immersive understanding of people's lives, especially of those whose vulnerabilities multiply after a negative encounter with wildlife. He believes that such an understanding is required for care-ful listening and designing socially acceptable mitigation measures. We elaborate on these below.

By care-ful listening we mean listening with empathy as well as discernment. In Anand's words, "It is important to listen to people's articulation of loss but it needs to be taken with a pinch of salt." He shared an example to explain his perspective - for example, elephants may have broken flower pots arranged on the verandah of a bungalow and similarly, they may have also broken a wall in a line house. But while the resident of a bungalow might vociferously describe their loss and draw everyone's attention to it, the resident of a line house might be more diffident about speaking out about their damaged house. However, as a mitigator, it becomes *his* responsibility to be attuned to these different expressions of loss, the underlying sensibility towards elephants and the impact on the person's life. He firmly believes that this can be gained only through immersion in other people's realities and hence he began his fieldwork by living in a line house himself to understand how the presence of an elephant might disrupt someone's routines and sense of security.

With respect to socially acceptable measures, Anand meant strategies that are practical and feasible both for mitigators to facilitate and people to follow. For instance, he mentioned that many mitigation programmes seek to curb people's mobility and warn them against being outdoors from 6 pm to 6 am. According to him, this is neither possible for mitigators to ensure nor for people to adhere to and he said with conviction, "A conflict mitigator must know before he or she speaks to the people, what is achievable and doable. If we make promises we cannot fulfill, they will never trust us. We need to promise what we can manage from our resources." On a related note about trust, Anand also pointed out that it was crucial for mitigators to understand when people felt most vulnerable and to be present accordingly. For example, they should prioritise calls that report the presence of elephants close to housing lines and help people deal with their fear and confusion during such events. This, like considering one's accountability, is a recurrent act of care.

The intervention triangle

The NCF intervention can be said to have three sides which connect and support each other, like the arms of a triangle. The first is the information arm which tracks, records and stores the identities, locations and other data on the elephant herds; the second is the communication arm which sends out alerts to the residents of Valparai and the third is the coordination arm which liaises with residents, the forest department, estate managers and other key actors. According to Anand, consistent and reliable team work is required to keep the different arms in position and create an intervention that remains effective over many years. The NCF intervention tracks around 120 elephants although its team is a small one (Kumar and Raghunathan 2019) and their main goal, as we mentioned in Chapter 1, is to "remove fear of the unknown" with respect to the movement and behaviour of elephant herds. In the following sections, we will introduce you to some of the most experienced members and their work.

Information: "Daily, we need to come out and watch"

The field workers of the NCF team are just two or three in number but they track the movements of over a hundred elephants across the entire Valparai plateau. Their location data is the bedrock on which the early warning system rests. Prakash is the most senior of this team and has been with NCF for almost two decades now. He belongs to the indigenous Kadar community - he has seen elephants close to his house from childhood onwards and has been taught by family how to behave around them. But he learnt to identify and name individual elephants after joining NCF. Each day he rides out on his bike and speaks to a number of residents, estate security guards, workers and supervisors to locate the elephant herds.

Prakash talks to himself while planning his route: "The ABC herd stations itself close to water bodies, but XYZ herd always goes near the forest fragment. Sometimes they climb up the hill and stay there for many days at a stretch, so I need to go and check all these places. We received some information yesterday from a field supervisor of SSS estate - he had told us that a herd of 6 elephants are in their field number 16, but we are yet to identify and locate that elephant herd. Where would they have moved? If it was the PPP herd, they would have gone inside the forest fragment and come out at night to raid the nearby ration shop because I heard that the ration shop recently got a fresh stock of rice and sugar. The ADS members I called said that those elephants are not on their side, so I need to enter the estate from this side and scan the area… the herd would

certainly be close to the forest fragments along the road. If they begin crossing the road, we will need to alert everyone immediately, so I need to speed up my search." As his musings indicate, apart from an active network of informants, this work requires knowledge of the terrain, a biographical understanding of the herds and an ability to anticipate where and when an actual human-elephant encounter might occur. Even after many years of fieldwork, Prakash says he needs to be extremely vigilant. "Daily, we need to come out and watch, [because] if we think 'what can happen in a day' [and we sit back] everything will happen on that day only!" He continues to explain, "Not everybody is interested in taking up such a job. Many would ask 'why do we need to go [everyday] … we already know the elephant is standing there from our visit yesterday, is it not?" But according to him, even though elephants are slow-moving animals and usually remain within a 2–3 km radius of their previous location, tracking them is still difficult.

"Many things can change, suddenly the elephants might move along a different path due to the solar fencing or people chasing them." Acknowledging and dealing with change, rather than constancy, is critical to the anticipation and management of conflict. Hence, Prakash emphasises that the repetitive, laborious task of tracking the elephants every day is an important one. Moreover, he feels personally invested in the work he is doing because he discloses,"If I sat at home, I would just be tense [wondering where the elephants are] so I take my bike and come to look for them. Going to look for elephants is always good - on some days I feel feverish, but when I step out to see the elephants and meet other people, the fever goes away immediately."

Prakash once used the term *kulambi-teliyanum* to describe his mode of knowledge production: *kulambi-teliyanum* can loosely be translated as the sedimentation of confusion to clarity. He said, "Initially, there will be some confusion about elephant locations but if we keep on coming out daily and watching them, we will acquire clarity about where to go and search. We need some confusion, just like we all need some fear, because this keeps us from becoming casual or absent-minded about elephants. Some confusion first and then some clarity will come (*kulambi-teliyanum*) ... that is the correct way." We can infer that the regularity and attention with which he does his tracking lends epistemic weight and converts the point observations into layered knowledge of particular herds and their movement patterns. It is also a pedagogical statement about what it takes to acquire knowledge of wildlife i.e., if a person does not like to grapple with confusion they cannot learn about animal behaviour. Alternatively, we can also understand it as a philosophical observation i.e., a person

must be able to enjoy both moments of confusion and clarity because they are integral to caring for elephants.

Prakash has many stories to tell such as how a drowsy man walked straight towards an elephant, how people and elephants walked peacefully along opposite banks of a stream or instances when people and elephants got confused when their old paths were altered by newly-laid tar roads. But we noticed an interesting lacuna - unlike most fieldworkers who have at least a few anecdotes about how they cleverly escaped from a charging elephant, Prakash has none. When we probed him, he said, "No elephants chased me. If we maintain proper distance and do nothing [to disturb them], why are they going to chase us?" This simple but powerful statement is indicative of the deep sensibility he has from working *with* elephants and not merely *on* them.

Communication: "It is your voice on the phone, right?"

The elephant-related information that is collected by Prakash and other fieldworkers is sent to the next person in the NCF chain, Chitra, in the form of a Google map with the elephant location marked by a blue dot and a few lines of text describing the location and the local name or landmarks. Chitra then composes this into a simple text message that can be sent to residents through SMS, voice messages and ticker tape text on the local TV channel: "Elephants are in XYZ location," followed by the helpline number. Next, she identifies the estates which fall within a radius of 2 km. From the NCF database of about 4500 families, she extracts the contact numbers of people residing or working in those estates and sends them the elephant location alerts, twice a day. She sends out around 2000 text messages and 1500 voice alerts every day (Kumar et al 2020).

Chitra joined the elephant programme almost by accident in 2015. She is quite different from the other NCF staff due to her background: she holds a Master's degree in social work rather than any wildlife-related domain and had worked with women's self-help groups earlier. She recalled her early days at NCF saying, "I do not know much about this field. I had no idea about all this [human - elephant conflict management] … it took time to settle down. [Before taking up this job] I have heard a lot of stories about them [conservationists] 'They went to see elephants… and they saw LTMs [Lion-tailed Macaques]' like that … When I heard those stories, I used to keep my mouth open like a child and listen with awe. I did not take up this job out of my interest in wildlife - I don't know how I took up this job."

At first, she had many questions such as "Why do elephants need to come out of the forest, to the places where people live?" But joining NCF gave

her a new perspective on life in Valparai: "I found out that there is this much [conflict] happening - estate people are getting affected, all that I got to know. [Only after taking up this job] I understood why animals are coming out of the forest, to what extent we have degraded nature…a lot of other things that I didn't know earlier, I learnt after going to NCF. But I have started thinking a lot - I have started to think differently. Now, to some extent, I have understood the reason why animals are coming out of the forest."

In the beginning, she felt self conscious as well - about recording her own voice as she created the voice alerts. However, with Ganesh's encouragement, she overcame her shyness. She also believed no one would be able to recognise that it was her voice and took solace in this belief. But eventually, through the overlapping social networks of Valparai, people came to identify her: "You are the one speaking from there, right?" This gave her quite a jolt - why would anyone be interested in identifying the person behind an alert message? She realised the significance of her work only after a chance meeting with an elderly resident. "In 2018, I met an elderly man who was disabled. He asked me about my job, and I told him what I did at NCF. He said, 'You are doing an honourable job, do you understand that? Knowingly or unknowingly, you are saving someone's life every day.' After I heard this, I felt very satisfied that we [the NCF team] are doing something good. I actually feel proud [of my job]".

As she began to attend NCF meetings regularly and heard the discussions on the number of human injuries and deaths each year due to negative encounters with elephants, she resolved "Our alerts must not miss reaching anyone - no one must suffer because I made a mistake." Now, she claims, wherever she is, even if she is on leave or falls sick, "my hands automatically send messages at morning 11 a.m. and evening 4 p.m."

As she became more accustomed to the work, people also began to call her up directly. They would tell her, "The elephant is actually in field number 5, but your message says field number 1" or "The alert lights haven't been turned on, can you tell them [the NCF frontline team] to check?" Or "Yesterday the elephant was here but you didn't give us any information!" Chitra has long, friendly chats with these callers and follows up on whatever needs to be done. She recognises that these inputs from other residents are very important and hence makes a sincere effort to maintain rapport with them.

Sometimes, she even handles distress calls about elephants that have come too close to someone's home and are trying to break down doors and windows. "In the tension of that moment, they [people] won't

say anything specific, they will just say, 'Please ask them [the forest department] to come quickly, we are very scared'. We need to understand their situation, be gentle in our tone, inform the forest department and then call them [people] back about when the ADS team will reach the location and share their contact number. That's how we usually handle these situations. [Sometimes there are delays and] they keep calling us continuously. We have to handle that too. [Once] a woman with children called in panic because an elephant was standing outside her house and no one had come to help her. She was the only one in that housing line - she had been told to vacate the place but she hadn't. [That day] out of frustration, she scolded me. Later, she vacated the house and moved elsewhere. However, she called me one day to apologise for the things she said in panic."

Chitra says her previous experience of working with a non-profit Christian trust which mobilised women's self-help groups has been helpful. In Chitra's own words, "Even if they [the nuns who ran the trust] scolded someone for a reason, the very next moment they would show love and manage to change the person's behaviour. Seeing that taught me a lot … I learnt a lot from the Sisters. Otherwise, I wouldn't have known how to handle people. By watching how they spoke and dealt with others, I picked up those skills."

Here, we can discern another thread of the history of pastoral care we mentioned in Chapter 4. Further, Chitra shares that people have described her tone variously as 'motherly care,' 'fatherly concern' or 'friendly like a sister'. She recognises that people find it comforting when the language of care mimics traditional familial relations and hence frames her conversations accordingly.

Coordination: "Conflict management is all people management"

We could say that the work of the coordinator, the third node in the NCF chain, is the most multifaceted one because it involves a wide range of activities and negotiations. Ganesh has been the coordinator since 2015. He remembers Anand saying, "I need a person who speaks Tamil and English; someone who can confidently talk to estate managers, workers, government officials; and someone who has a decent understanding of elephants." Anand was categorical that the NCF team's work could not just end with sending out the elephant location alerts. He believed that to be effective, any conflict mitigation programme needed to be based on a long-term, trust-based relationship with people in the landscape. Hence a programme coordinator was required to connect and knit together

different stakeholders into a network of care. The following list provides provides examples of the varied tasks the coordinator must engage with.

1. *Attend phone calls:* The coordinator may receive calls from multiple stakeholders, at any time of the day or night. For instance, estate workers may call to inform Ganesh about an elephant herd's location as well as to seek help when the herd moves to their place of residence or work. Supervisors and managers of plantations, on the other hand, may call to discuss the effectiveness of solar fencing or chat about recent elephant-related incidents. Range officers, foresters and ADS members tend to call about issues related to an elephant's death and the subsequent autopsy that is required. Journalists call to ask for updates on elephant movement and the monetary losses incurred by locals. The coordinator has to patiently attend to all of these.
2. *Visit and revisit people:* The employees of both, the estates and the forest department, get transferred frequently. Hence the coordinator needs to introduce himself and the NCF Elephant Programme to new staff members. It is also important for him to revisit older employees and keep those connections strong since such people are far more likely to cooperate in a crisis as compared to someone who came to know of NCF only recently.
3. *Conduct orientation workshops:* The coordinator has to conduct orientation programmes for major stakeholders such as the local residents, estate employees and the staff of the forest department so that they understand NCF's intervention and are updated on the practices that facilitate coexistence. Echoing Anand, Ganesh says it is important to, "Give honest, true information to people in the simplest form possible. They are very smart people, they have been living in this place for many years, and people are not stupid. They just need the correct kind of information. Half of the problem [conflict] is wrong information."

In all of the tasks mentioned above—attending calls, repeated visits and orientation programmes—the main message that the coordinator seeks to convey is one of reassurance i.e., "We are here for you." As the face of the NCF intervention, the coordinator tries to reach out to as many people as possible, in as many avenues as available, to propose, convince and assure everyone that with caring and careful practices, humans and elephants can coexist.

As Ganesh further elaborates, "Elephants are not going to listen to what we are going to say, so it is about the people. Conflict management is all people management […] Change happens in the mind." This requires

considerable tacit knowledge of both elephants and people - like the ADS, he too needs to tread a delicate balance and work in-between (see Chapter 6). For instance, in the early years, some plantation companies employed dozens of men and hired some jeeps to chase away elephants when they entered the estates. Ganesh met them repeatedly and convinced them that the elephants were merely passing through the estates and would not live in them for any length of time. He even produced calculations to underscore to managers the expense of engaging in these unnecessary chases. Some years later, he convinced many of the estates to adjust the placement of their solar fences so that there was sufficient space for elephant herds to use their customary entry and exit points into the estates and continue with their seasonal migration. This met the needs of both sides without causing too much inconvenience. At the same time, he recognises that just as the elephants are habituated to certain patterns of behaviour, such as using particular paths, people too are habituated to respond in certain ways, such as chasing away the elephants. Therefore, he views conflict mitigation not in an idealistic way i.e., as establishment of a permanent state of 'peace' but as a never-ending task of negotiation and tinkering, to bring in some fluidity into rigid patterns and find practical, acceptable solutions (see also Chapter 3).

However, the interventions are not always successful and despite these meticulous micropractices of care, people do die from encounters with elephants. Referring to the recent death of a woman who was around 65 years of age he said, "She was living alone, with no social support. Somebody said to her at that moment [when the elephant came closer to her home] that leaving the house was safe, she just listened. If I am in a state of severe anxiety, I would also listen blindly to others. It can make you sit still in one place or just shoot out [of the house]. You would not even realise you are running. If she believed running away from the elephant, which was standing just outside her house, was safe, just imagine how unsafe she must have felt inside the house." Such deaths leave him with a deep sense of melancholy and he says, "the opportunity to work stops the moment a person dies." Ganesh's face fell when he said "I do not like people going through the trauma of an elephant coming near their home. It is not nice to hear them panic at night and call me. It is not nice when elephants get chased either… I got a call at 4 am this morning. [But] that is the harsh reality." Moreover, he says he experiences considerable fatigue and exhaustion, from listening "to people panicking about elephant presence without following even minimal precautions" or clinging to false beliefs. The intensity of this affective labour is such that during a bad season—when he is dealing with a combination of multiple crises and lack of rest—he sometimes wakes up with a deep

sense of fatigue or anger. But similar to the ADS, he finds great comfort in spending time outdoors, watching the elephants.

The dilemma of trust

Similar to the ADS' realisation that the main register in which they work is the present continuous tense, the voices from NCF too indicate how important an iterative approach is, to build both the knowledge and social relations required to mitigate conflicts and create a mixed community. In other words, iteration is central to the careful and caring modes of engagement NCF follows which in turn, indicates the sheer amount of time and effort required to sustain such interventions. Moreover, it points to a core challenge in building care networks – trust is indispensable, but such trust is usually deeply personal and hence places an enormous burden of expectation on certain caregivers. For instance, when Prakash or Ganesh reassure some residents that a particular elephant herd will calmly move away in two days' time – people will wait patiently because *their* words carry weight. But should they be mistaken even once out of 50 times, or if an encounter unexpectedly turns negative, they will not only be reminded of the error by everyone around, but they will also have to grapple with the moral residue created by such mishaps. Or imagine a panic-stricken caller who dials the helpline—what brings them reassurance is that it is *Chitra*—a person they know and trust—who answers the call. As Ganesh and Anand wryly acknowledge, few things would infuriate people more than hearing an automated message that asked them to "Press 1 if you saw a bear, press 2 if you saw an elephant…" although it would be a practical solution to the challenge of keeping the helpline functional 24x7.

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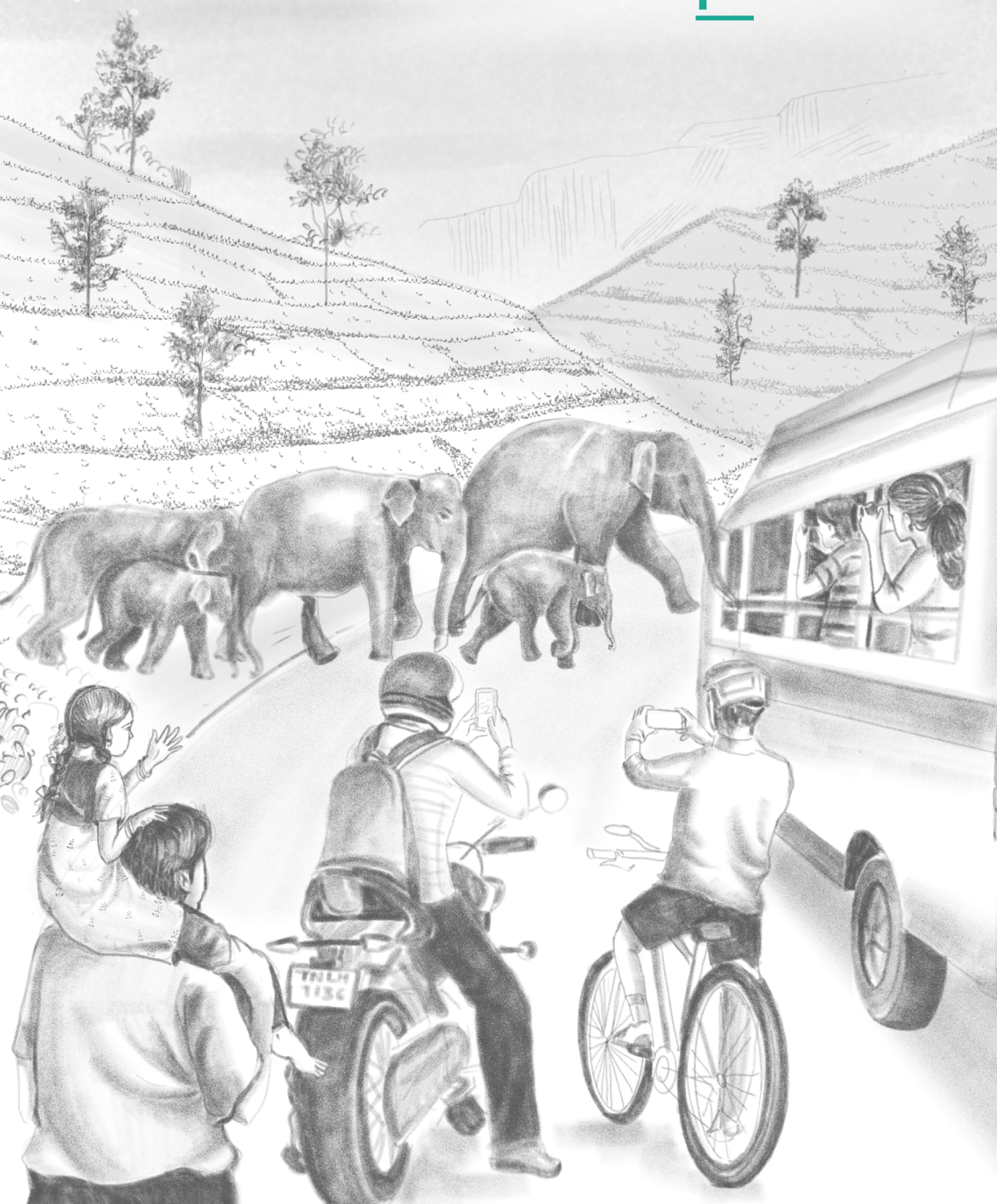
08 Moving Forward with Hope



In the Introduction (Chapter 1) to this book, we began with Anand's observation that conservationists need to work hard to facilitate co-existence between humans and wildlife. We described how such conservation efforts are a form of care work or affective labour because they seek to build new social relations and mixed (interspecies) communities. We used NCF's Elephant Programme in Valparai as a starting point for our exploration of the practices that constitute such care work, and we traced how they help to cultivate and maintain interspecies sociality. Moreover, we paid attention to whether people other than conservationists i.e., the general residents of Valparai, too engage in caring for wildlife—in this case elephants—and the forms this could take. Our analysis of conservation practices here is not meant as an endorsement of any one approach over the other but rather, is an effort to sketch how taking multiple perspectives into account and working collaboratively over a long period can improve the way in which humans and elephants interact with each other.

Care as a micropractice

From our fieldwork, we found that a range of actors, beyond NCF's own team of conservationists, do indeed engage in the affective labour that enables coexistence. These actors include many of the typical residents of Valparai such as cattle herders, bus drivers, *kaikatti*, ration shop owners, tea pluckers, families in the housing lines, etc. They engage in what we have termed 'micropractices of care' i.e., people show some level of attunement to the presence of elephants and tinker with their everyday routines to reduce negative interactions. The tinkering is based on both, their own interpretations of elephant behaviour as well as information that has been shared through awareness programmes organised by NCF, the forest department and plantation companies. Moreover, hardly anyone apart from our indigenous respondents referred to the influence of myth or religion with respect to their regard for elephants - this presents a stark contrast to other parts of India (Thekaekara et al 2021; Keil 2025).

We have described some of these perspectives and spontaneous—almost personal—acts of care in detail (see Chapters 3, 4 and 5 for instance). Such micropractices of care are important for us to acknowledge and understand because they point to how a range of affects such as fear, curiosity or loneliness may be harnessed by ordinary residents to build interspecies sociality. Moreover, they point to the establishment of a larger shared discourse and culture of living with wildlife, which the dramatists dubbed the *Valparai vazhakkam* (Chapter 4). Overall, our first main finding so to speak, is that many residents of Valparai also care

about elephants and translate their care into action. However, these are often unique to an individual person or event and hence effective only within that frame. Further, they are insufficient to address a crisis and over the long term, even these micropractices can overburden people who already grapple with multiple resource constraints (time, income, social support etc) and eventually cause resentment. Therefore, there is certainly a need for a more systematic, large-scale approach to foster coexistence - this is where more influential actors such as the ADS, plantation companies and NCF play a complementary role.

Many affective paths to care

With respect to our efforts to unpack the role of affect in shaping the responses of the residents, we found that the local interpretation of fear as an essential element in human-wildlife interactions to be novel. Specifically, some of our respondents pointed to how some level of mutual fear between elephants and humans often prevents conflict because it ensures that both sides maintain a certain level of decorum and caution during encounters (Chapter 3). This is thought-provoking because conservationists usually view fear of a species as a purely negative phenomenon and therefore, they spend long hours trying to completely eradicate it - usually by providing a barrage of factual information that is intended to replace fear with other affective responses such as curiosity or wonder. On the other hand, too much fear also has profoundly negative impacts, especially on people's lives. Therefore there appears to be a delicate relation between fear and safety: for both humans and nonhumans to be safe in shared landscapes, they need to have neither too much nor too little fear of each other.

We also found it fascinating to record the spectrum of affective responses a single elephant could evoke from different people, and how this could change with the life stage of the elephant. Our condensed biography of Monica, the matriarch of the Korangumudi region, captures some of these shifting relations and indicates the complexity of human-elephant interactions even at the level of one individual elephant. Finally, it provides a glimpse of how there may be a distinct set of practices through which people express care towards dead nonhumans as well (Chapter 5).

Care as a systematic intervention

Since we have already provided a detailed account of the affective labour undertaken by the conservations, or more accurately mitigators from the ADS and NCF (see Chapters 1, 6 and 7), here we would like to highlight three characteristic features of such expert care i.e., it is science-based,

there is a strong sense of accountability, it builds on existing social networks and institutional powers.

Based on science and technology

The expert, systematic form of care enacted by the ADS and NCF rests on a scientific understanding of elephant sociality. It involves both quantitative and qualitative elements: The idea of a 'safe distance' of interactions forms the quantitative kernel. Whether it was Anand calculating the shortest distance that needs to be maintained between a human and an elephant for it to be safe for both sides, or the ADS and Chitra deciding which residents to alert about elephant presence, these calculations of distance played a key role. At the same time, mitigators also required a qualitative understanding—of the personalities of the elephant herds and human individuals—to judge when negative encounters are most likely, and to prioritise their efforts accordingly.

The use of technology to track elephant movement, create databases and biographies, set up early warning systems near housing colonies etc., is another important dimension of this intervention. As mentioned earlier, it presents an example of how technology, if used with sensitivity, can reduce the likelihood of people suddenly encountering elephants in their vicinity and the resulting negative outcomes for both sides (see Chapter 6).

Builds on existing social networks and institutional powers

As the mitigators shared, they drew on their own social networks (formed through family, friendships, prior work experience, etc) to build this intervention, develop rapport with different groups of residents, gather and disseminate information. This embeddedness in Valparai society has also helped the mitigators repair relations after a conflict event. Further, the design of the intervention also uses existing forms of governance to make care practices more effective: For example, it mobilises the financial power of the forest department to allocate material resources to the ADS; it enlists the power of plantation companies to modify their worker schedules in response to elephant movement or change how rations are stored and disbursed; and it borrows pastoral metaphors of care to ensure that residents follow safety guidelines.

Sense of accountability

Although this is at its core a technical intervention, informed by long-term scientific study, the practices of the mitigators also demonstrated

a strong sense of empathy towards the struggles of ordinary residents. We suggest that this commitment to engaging with the problem *without* 'taking sides" and the mitigators' sense of accountability to both elephants and people, has enhanced the credibility and effectiveness of the intervention.

It is important to remember that although NCF's Elephant Programme began around two decades ago, their intervention remains a work-in-progress because both elephant and human behaviours keep changing. Further, an approach that works in one context may not in another - for instance, the challenges may be very different if NCF was to attempt such an intervention in a region where the cultivation of rice, rather than tea, was the main economic activity. Or if the plantations were small, family-run operations with far fewer resources to repair elephant-caused property damage than large plantation companies. This implies that scientific, systematic interventions too require significant tinkering when the goal is to extend care, because they need to be responsive to changes in situations and relations.

Support for practitioners

It is a curious fact that none of the key NCF members (Anand, Ganesh, Prakash and Chitra) we spoke to were biologists per se and all of them mentioned that their prior social exposure and/or training proved useful to their current work of conflict mitigation. This points to the considerable demand that affective labour imposes on 'regular' conservationists - most tend to be formally trained in the biological sciences alone and as such, psychological distress seems to be a common occupational hazard (Behelkar et al 2020, Pienkowski et al 2023, Cooke et al 2024." Against such a background, practitioners who repeatedly engage with distressed people shoulder an enormous burden, one that can, over time, take a toll on their physical health as well. We did not study this aspect methodically but in conversations, our respondents attributed a spectrum of changes to work stress including interrupted sleep or insomnia, mood swings, elevated blood pressure, poor appetite, strained personal relations etc. We need more studies to evaluate the impact of human-wildlife conflict not only on local communities but also on frontline mitigators themselves. Nevertheless, in the spirit of engaged research with which we began this study, we have borrowed from initiatives in the domain of healthcare to sketch some steps that might help to strengthen the resilience of frontline conservation practitioners and the sustainability of such interventions:

1. *Training:* As mentioned above, institutions can provide broader training to help practitioners engage sensitively with the human and nonhuman dimensions of their work because care work can both be taught and learned. The training could cover a range of skills from participatory data collection to emotional management of others and oneself in distressing situations and evaluation of ethically challenging actions (for example: when, how and where to translocate elephants).

2. *Peer support:* Practitioners might also benefit from creating space for themselves to meet across institutions to appreciate each other's efforts, learn from experiments and exchange notes on healthy coping strategies. Keeping such gatherings open, informal and supportive is important for this purpose.

3. *Institutional support:* Structural support within an institution could include elements such as periodic rotation of workloads, providing time off for recovery after intense events and enlisting steady financial support from donors since such interventions need to be continued over several years before there is discernible change. Timely recognition and appreciation are also important.

With discomfort and hope

It appears that the presence of wildlife in inhabited areas is only likely to increase in the future due to the easy availability of food resources coupled with the deterioration or destruction of habitats by a range of factors, from the spread of invasive species to significant soil and water pollution. And hence the search for viable coexistence models will probably continue. This is a process fraught with challenges and dilemmas because it requires us to navigate between the overlapping claims of compassion and fairness - compassion that acknowledges the needs of sentient nonhumans and fairness in terms of the burden coexistence can impose on particular human communities, some of whom may already be dealing with multiple deprivations. In these situations, it is important and necessary to work with a sense of ethical discomfort because it keeps us attentive to the wellbeing of others and the larger question of how to live together.

At the same time, there are also reasons to remain hopeful - different human and nonhuman communities are creating new cultures and degrees of coexistence through their everyday practices. They may offer localised answers or simply move this search a few steps forward, rather than straightaway establish an ideal world. Nevertheless, we believe such hands-on efforts are important and there is much to be learnt from

them - documenting and sharing these stories can play a part in helping us expand our collective imagination of what might be possible and spur us to take more thoughtful actions. Therefore, we end on a note of hope that if many more of us care enough to labour for the wellbeing of both humans and nonhumans, we may indeed find more innovative and ethical ways of living together in diverse, mixed communities.

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Tinkering with Care in Human-Elephant Interactions

In the Valparai plateau in southern India, encounters between people and Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*) are common and sometimes they result in conflict. Building on almost a year of fieldwork, this book presents a polyvocal account of how the Nature Conservation Foundation along with other actors such as the forest department, workers and management of tea plantation companies and ordinary residents engage in a range of care-ful and caring practices that enable people and elephants to share space and cultivate a sense of interspecies sociality.

This book speaks to the anthropology of biodiversity conservation, human-wildlife coexistence and multispecies studies.

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