
The man eating elephant

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Abbreviations

AC-	Air Conditioner
ADFO-	Additional DFO
BS-	Ban Shramik
CF-	Conservator of Forests
CGI-	Corrugated Galvanised Iron
DFO-	Divisional Forest Officer
IG-	Inspector General of Police
NGO-	Non-Government Organisation
OC-	Officer- in- Charge
RO-	Range Officer
RT-	Radio Transmitter
SP-	Superintendent
SSB-	Sashastra Seema Bal
TE/ TG-	Tea Estate or Tea Garden

Local words

Ban Shramik –	Contractual labours inducted as Guard without sanctioned post
<i>Basti</i> -	A hamlet; a rural colony
<i>Bhabar (bhäbar)</i> -	Dry areas of duars where ground water level is very low.
<i>Bidi</i> -	Local cigarette in which tobacco flake in <i>Tëndü</i> leaves wrapped with a thread
<i>Däl</i> -	Lentils
<i>Duars (duärs)</i> -	Doors to abode in Himalaya. In north Bengal it door to Bhutan
<i>Handiä (handiyä)</i> -	Local liquor
<i>Hät</i> -	Weekly market where local people sell their products
<i>Jhorä</i> -	A stream
<i>Jyonä</i> -	The daytime meal. The meal after sunset is called <i>Bêli</i> or <i>Byäloo</i>
<i>Kachchä</i> -	Weak; opposite of <i>paccä</i>
<i>Kumrobandh</i> -	Thicket elephant
<i>Maknä</i> -	A male without tusk.
<i>Müri</i> -	Puffed rice
<i>Paccä</i> -	Strong
<i>Paccä</i> building-	Cement-concrete building
<i>Paccä</i> road-	Metalled road
<i>Panchayat</i> -	A group of villages
<i>Räi</i> -	Mustard greens
<i>Samädh</i> -	Memorial
<i>Tambä</i> -	Bamboo shoots
<i>Täntriks</i> -	One who performs black magic as a cure of all evils
<i>Terai (teräi)</i> -	The area of duars where ground water level is very high
<i>Tëndü</i> -	<i>Diospyros melanoxyton</i> . Its leaves used to roll <i>Bidi</i> cigarettes

ä as in car, mast

ê as in bell, pet

i as in meet, seed

ü as in tool, cute

From the author's desk

This book is based upon the official report of the Conservator of Forests of the Hill Circle jurisdiction. The report was submitted to the Chief Wildlife Warden, West Bengal in Kolkata. The contents of the report have been slightly modified mainly to avoid repetition and to maintain continuity and flow of narration. There is no exaggeration as far as the killing incidents in India are reported. The description of occurrences in Nepal is based on loose information collected from persons who claimed to have interacted with the people of the affected area. In the absence of a complete sequence of events, their versions have been given a little imaginative touch to match with the incidents in India.

The names of people killed in India are actual names mentioned in the report. Similarly, SK Dutta of Marapur TE, GD Goliram of Tukra basti Sashtra Seema Bal (SSB), Pannalal, Kalu Thapa and Suk Bahadur Tamang of Amrit basti in Bamanpokhri, and Ari Kumar Rai and Tika Bahadur Rai of Tukra basti are all real names collected from the official report. Rest of the names are fictitious. The DFOs of Kurseong and Wildlife Darjeeling, the Range Officers of Bamanpokhri, Panighata, Bagdogra and Tukriajhar were almost continuously on duty during the entire operation. So was the staff under them. In spite of their extraordinary contribution in such a dangerous situation, their names are not being mentioned since they are still serving in the department. Since the hunter also provides regular service, his name has also not been mentioned.

The firing incident, in which the baby elephant died, is a dramatic narration of the actual event with the intention of creating empathy in the minds of readers. This death is not a hypothetical account. The baby was actually killed by bullet firing. The overall narration of this episode is based on real incidents.

Prologue

It was a terror unleashed. There was a curfew. A curfew in which no one was allowed to be seen, observed or even felt. It was immaterial whether one was inside the house or outside. The moment it was felt that there is a person in the vicinity, death sentence was issued and the order was executed within no time. It was inconceivable, but it lasted for a couple of days. It did not have sanction of any law of the country. There was no time to think what was happening and why. The people of western *Duars* in north Bengal were in a state of complete panic. The police, instead of rescuing the people, were themselves looking for a saviour. They were completely helpless against an unarmed opponent. The army was approached. Yet there was no solution. It was not an activity of terrorists. It was not an act of man. It was an animal that we have killed, tortured, captured, domesticated and even worshiped for ages. An elephant had gone berserk. It began to kill people - one by one and sparing none. And the terror began.

The episode of depredation by the wild elephant was like a fifty-hour long nightmare for local residents as well as for the forest officials. Its bloody trail, extending from Nipania, Tukra basti, Marapur, Kolabari, Bamandangi (Nepal), Tatari, through Bagdogra and Bamanpokhri, left thirteen people dead and ended with its own demise. Out of the ten killings in that episode, seven took place in broad day light in front of scores of horrified and fleeing people. The ferocity of the animal, apparent in the killings, was unheard of. It used far more power to kill and destroy than was necessary and ever reported. It used its full power, in almost all cases, to grind the victims into paste.

Rogue elephants have been killing people since time immemorial. There are hundreds of stories where hunters have boasted about killing elephants responsible for human deaths in a series of attacks. Every year scores of people get killed in north Bengal by elephants that are mostly solitary bulls. Even in a herd, only the male elephants attack. Females resort to killing only in self-defence or for the security of young calves, which are not in a position to defend themselves. But this case was different. A female elephant had turned rogue. Neither was it solitary nor was there a baby in the vicinity for whom a mother would worry. The elephant had shed all fear of human beings. For the attack, the animal had come out of the forest at midday. No sound, however loud, was able to scare the animal. No light would repel it. Never in the history of wildlife has such an incident ever been reported. Whoever broke the news was mocked upon. Anyone who had knowledge about elephant behaviour was puzzled. The experts sitting in the state capital presumed it to be an unusual exaggeration. The people, the foresters, and the police were at the mercy of a giant beast. The villagers were searching for a safe shelter. The foresters were busy screening every corner of the forest. The police was helping the foresters in order to keep the law and order situation under control. The mysterious crisis had negated all their efforts.

Duars- a paradise lost

The people of *duars* are well versed with the man-elephant conflict. *Duars* are the north Bengal plains in the Himalayan foothills. A century ago, there were no habitations in this region. Forest expanses in these plains and adjoining undulating hills with Kanchenjunga in the backdrop, made this area a place of unparalleled beauty. The climate of this area was excellent, neither too hot nor too cold. Perennial rivers flowed in this region. With rivers invariably changing their course, every year flash floods took away a large chunk of forest tracts. The grasslands that developed on the dead river courses subsequently made way for thick forests. Again with another flood, the cycle was repeated. This process ensured sufficient food for the herbivores. At the same time, this fragility of the area discouraged people to settle here. This region was then ruled by the inhabitants of the wild without any human interference.

Over the years, men started the gradual enslavement of nature. Envious of the freedom enjoyed by the four-legged animals in the wild since time immemorial, the biped animal launched a war against nature in the last few centuries. The wild creatures followed rules made by nature. Their liberty was a hindrance to the greed of men in plundering the forest resources. Therefore, humans decided to demolish the only shelter of animals. And in the nineteenth century, axes silenced the serenity of the forests. With more and more people settling in the region, the natural balance of this area tilted against the wild creatures. Two centuries ago, tea bush plantations were introduced in the area. Other commercial uses of forests also started. People were brought from outside for working in the tea gardens and the forests. Army camps were established in this area. These establishments, situated in prime animal habitats, obstructed the free movement of elephants. Road and rail links pierced through the elephant corridor. The last nail in the coffin was the construction of the Tista Barrage. The dam engulfed a part of the corridor through which elephant crossed the Tista River. The fast flowing water on the upper streams of the river through the hills obstructed elephant migration and human settlements on the lower side of the dam limited their movement. After a lot of effort, the elephants had manoeuvred a route through the swollen waters when conditions were favourable. Yet, accidents happened. In spite of being good swimmers, four elephants succumbed to the turbulent water of the river in the year 1996.

On that fateful night, a herd of elephants was crossing the Tista River. Since that morning, it had been raining cats and dogs in the hills of Sikkim and Darjeeling. The river was in full spate. The Tista Dam authorities opened the floodgates as the rising water was fast approaching the danger level. A forest staff working in the nearby area observed this. He noticed that a herd of elephants, in the middle of the barrage, was unable to cope up with the speed of the gushing water. He rushed to the barrage authorities and requested them to stop the release of the water from the barrage. Although in a fix, the barrage authorities took immediate action and closed the floodgate. With this relief, a few elephants managed

to cross over. But a few others were not so lucky. The incessant rain filled the barrage in no time. The dam authorities were left with no option. They again opened the gate. A little delay and the barrage itself could be washed away. The turbulent water began to sweep away the elephants once again. Already tired, the elephants succumbed to the ferocity of water.

Crossing the rivers in north Bengal is a compulsion for the elephants. They are migratory in nature. To avoid pressure on one area for their large food requirement, they move from one place to another. In the past, they used to travel between Assam and Nepal without any obstruction through the continuous forest stretch in north Bengal. The vast stretch of wilderness, which provided a fortress-like safety for the wild creatures, was now converted into fragmented forest patches. For the elephants, these patches were like rooms in a village house, where one had to exit the house every time one wanted to go to another room. The elephants still managed to find a safe passage through small strips of vegetation outside the forest areas while moving in their corridor. Now, except Buxa Tiger Reserve, there is no other big forest patch. The vacant areas outside the forests, which the elephants used for rest during their migration from one forest block to another, have also been encroached upon. People have now occupied even riverbeds, which were once considered uninhabitable. Finding no alternative, the elephants are forced to pass through human settlements. Due to frequent interactions with people, these wild inhabitants have also picked up some of the unsavoury habits of man. In addition to raiding crops for paddy and maize, the elephants also attack houses for local liquor, called *handiä*. Thus, the human-elephant conflict is continuously on the rise.

People living in *duars*

In the war with nature, wild animals have lost everything - home, peace, liberty. But who is the winner? In the long run, no one is a winner. Apart from the elephants, the main victims of man-elephant conflict have mostly been the innocent people of *duars*, who never aspired to deprive the elephants of their homes. For them, the elephant is God as well as the devil incarnate. In the elephant corridor of north Bengal, basic amenities are a dream for them even now. For medical care they still depend on quacks, who inject medicines through clothes without sterilizing the syringe or prescribe saline solutions orally. The only alternatives to these quacks are the *tāntriks*, who create a fear of ghosts or other creatures of the netherworld in the minds of innocent people. These charlatans perform various tricks to deceive the villagers in the name of curing them.

The people in this area have generally been very poor. A substantial population lives in *kachchā* houses, constructed on raised platforms so that water accumulated during the rains does not enter the house. Yet the earthen floor, bamboo-mud walls and the thatched roof of these huts are not sufficient protection against heavy showers. In the past, when the people had free access to the forest resources, houses made of wooden planks nailed to wooden posts was a common sight in this region. In those days, Forest Rest Houses were also built of Sal wood posts and planks. It is difficult to imagine how such heavy posts, weighing in tons, were pitched firmly into the ground. These old structures still exist. But concrete foundation has largely replaced the wooden pillars. In these concrete-cum-timber buildings, those robust posts are not needed. The local people could never afford such big structures anyway. Nor they could afford frequent repairs. Therefore, with time some planks rotted away and were lost but the houses still stood. The ladders used for climbing up the first floor in a few houses were in dilapidated conditions. It was risky to use such stairs. Yet there were few accidents. In some houses, the entire front wall was missing. A few of the more affluent among them could afford loosely fit doors or windows in their houses.

The local people depend mainly on crops of maize or paddy. These crops are also the favourite food of the elephants. This fondness encourages the depredation in north Bengal. In spite of this man-elephant conflict over the crops, the local people still cultivate rice and corn, which are easy to store and give them sustained supply of food for the entire year. They work seasonally in forests and tea gardens. They also collect firewood, sometimes for their own use but mostly for selling in the market. Poverty forces many of them to commit timber theft. In spite of taking all the risk, they get little money in this. Moreover, they do not get payment unless the produce reaches a safe place. In addition, they are under the obligation of the local mafia for the money they had borrowed and had already spent.

They are so poor that they continue imploring these thugs for loans and advances. They spend the money on food and clothes immediately after getting the advance payment. A part of the money is also kept

reserved for local liquor. If they receive such advance payment in the evening, there are good chances that the liquor gets priority over other necessities. The most preferred day for such loans is the *hät* day. A few individuals are seen hovering on the highways on such days. Car drivers have to be extra alert on these *hät* days, as suddenly someone would appear in front of the vehicle in a state of drunken heroism. They are so inebriated that they spend the entire night in roadside ditches.

In spite of their poverty, the villagers lead a peaceful life without any grudge against anyone. They are an exploited lot, yet they are happy. In the mornings, people go for outdoor work. By noon they return and get busy with the preparation of lunch. The women take charge of the kitchen. The men keep themselves busy in petty works. While the menfolk sometimes can manage to get some leisure time, women are tasked with the winding up of the left over assignments. The day ends with dinner. The quality and quantity of the dinner depends on the financial resources of the family. In many families, only children can afford to have full meal twice a day. The women often depend on half meals. Although malnourished, the secret of their health is sound sleep in spite of hungry stomachs.

There has been some improvement over the years. A decade back, the situation was quite worse. The remote villages on the fringes of the forest in the foothills of Darjeeling were no exception. Tukra basti was a very poor village of fifteen to twenty huts. There was no water and no electricity. All huts were damaged. Parts of the walls were missing. Even tea garden shanties were better. They grew paddy and maize. They did not grow vegetables. In comparison, the Marapur Tea Garden labour line and Kolabari village nearby were slightly more prosperous. Chenga village located on a pitch road and with access to electricity was much better developed.

Tukra basti village was situated in the Nepal border in western *duars*. This village, in the shape of an inverted 'L', was surrounded by Nipania forest in the south, Marapur Tea Garden in the east and Manja Tea Garden in the north. About a 1.5 kilometre-wide stretch of the Mechi riverbed on the western side separated this village from Nepal. The longer arm of the L-shaped village, parallel to the Mechi River, was approximately one kilometre long in those days. The shorter arm, emerging from the northernmost tip of the village and extending east towards Marapur bush area, was approximately 300 metres. The nearest human settlement on this side was at a distance of about one kilometre. There were about a dozen huts in Tukra basti. In the last few years, this number has doubled. Unlike other villages where the houses were located in clusters, the huts in Tukra basti were spaced out. The average distance from one house to another was about 100 metres. All the huts were built on raised platforms.

On the northeastern end of the village, a SSB camp had been established a few months before incident took place. A person standing in the camp could see Nipania-Kolabari forest on the southern side and Lohagarh forest across the undulating terrain of Manja Tea Garden in the north. On the eastern side, one could enjoy the beauty of the Panighata hilly forest. The camp was merely a group of tents pitched on the ground. The boundary of the camp was not fenced. A small ditch, 3ft x 3ft, all along the boundary was no protection. There was knee-high wild growth of

weeds and bushes surrounding the camp. The closest hut of Tukra basti was about 150 metres away from the camp.

Tukra basti on that fateful day

It was a bright Sunday afternoon with scorching sun in the sky on the 23rd day of June in the year 2002. The people in the *basti* were busy in their domestic drudgery. Maila grabbed a stone to hammer a nail that had popped out from a wooden plank in the wall of his house. The nail had rusted with the wear and tear of time and was likely to injure someone. A few days back, his adolescent son had injured his arm against the nail while darting out of the house. He had blamed his son then for not taking precautions. When his own shirt was caught in the nail, he realized his mistake. Kancha was busy preparing bundles of harvested corns. These bundles, hanging in the house, could be seen from a distance. Harka was smoking a *Bidi*, a rural variation of a cigarette in which the tobacco is stuffed in a *Tëndü* leaf folded conically and wrapped with a loose thread around it to hold it in place.

The women, on the other hand, were busy cooking *Jyonä*. The food would be cooked in an aluminium utensil on an open flame where sometimes there would be more smoke than fire. These vigorously cleaned aluminium utensils would look like silverware. The main food ingredients in these parts are rice, maize and local vegetable: potato, chayote *Squash* or *räi*. In some houses, the vegetable is replaced by *däl*. In some of the richer families, a meal occasionally consists of both vegetable and *däl*. Expecting more than that in their homes would be a cruel joke.

Wearing torn clothes, the children were still busy playing. Their favourite sport was shooting birds with catapults. But success was rare. On the other hand, the catapult was extremely effective against the monkeys. The urban monkeys are quite ferocious and do not hesitate to attack people. Monkeys at a religious place are the worst. For children in the *basti* however, monkeys were no nuisance at all. With a catapult always in their pockets, the monkeys would never dare to attack them. At midday, with no monkeys or birds around, the catapults had disappeared deep into the pockets of their torn pants, held on to their waist with the help of a string.

Some of the boys were helping the adult males in the family with their household chores. One boy was assembling the corns. Another was splitting firewood. One young chap had managed to get an axe. He was chiselling a stick without knowing why he was doing that. No doubt, his irritated father would admonish him whenever his father's attention was diverted towards him. The scolding was intended to ensure safety of the child lest he should chop his fingers off. The boy also knew that his father, busy in some work, did not have the time to rebuke his son again. One boy was scratching at the soil on the ground. Another was beating the post of his house with a stick. Some of the children were exhausted. Waiting for their food, they were watching their mothers cooking something on the open fire. Still another child was irritating his mother, whining for something. Yet the atmosphere was quite untroubled in the village.

A nightmare begins at noon

On that day, an almost fierce eastern wind was sweeping through the plains of the *duars*. It was certainly not a heat wave akin to the 'loo' in northern India. The wind was not cool enough to bring comfort from the withering heat. The local people, in spite of the sweltering heat, were at ease. They were totally unaware of the impending catastrophe.

The ordeal began at 1230 hours. An elephant emerged from Nipania forest block of Kurseong Forest Division and proceeded towards Tukra basti village. The sudden appearance of a lone elephant from Nipania forest block of Kurseong Forest Division in the scorching sun, and heading straight towards a hut, alarmed the village people. Chaitanya Nagesia, the first ill-fated person about 60 years old, had arrived in Tukra basti earlier in the day to inspect his agriculture field. His maize field surrounded a house. On seeing the elephant in a ferocious mood, he entered the house and took shelter upstairs. The inhabitants of Tukra basti began to warn one another. The owner of the house, a young couple, also noticed the advancing elephant. Sensing danger, they immediately fled from the house. They shouted to warn Chaitanya to leave the house as well. But he could not act quickly due to his old age, and thus could not manage to escape. The young couple tried to look for a safe shelter, which they did not find. They kept running without knowing where to go until the elephant was out of sight. Yet the trumpeting of the elephant continued to haunt them. The elephant, in the meantime, charged straight at the house. The fragile structure immediately gave way.

After the house collapsed, Chaitanya emerged from the debris only to find himself in front of the elephant. In other circumstances, he would have concentrated on the nails and wooden splinters lest these objects should injure him. Instead, he jumped to his feet and attempted to run away from the elephant. At that moment, his reflexes were unbelievably quick for a man of his age. Yet he could not steer clear of the wreckage and stepped on a sharp object. In pain, he crashed to the ground. He again tried to get up. By then the elephant had moved up to him. Before he could get up on his feet again, the elephant charged with a nerve-shattering trumpet. While Chaitanya was stumbling among the debris and got injured by the sharp wooden splinters and nails, these were no deterrents for the elephant. Whatever came in its way got crushed under its feet. It seemed as though the elephant was treading on smooth ground. It ran amok without bothering about the obstacles. Lifting Chaitanya in its trunk, the elephant ran for about 30 metres before slamming him on the ground. There was a loud thud. It then pounded on Chaitanya ferociously with its forefoot.

There was a ripe maize crop all around the village. The elephant did not touch the crop. The only damage to the crop was due to the elephant rushing here and there and when it carried the body of Chaitanya through the field before throwing him to the ground.

The assault on Chaitanya did not go unnoticed. The house of Ari Kumar Rai was hardly 20 metres away from there. Ari Kumar Rai noticed the elephant heading menacingly towards Chaitanya when it was at a

distance of about 50 metres from them. Ari could instantly sense that something was seriously wrong. He immediately rushed upstairs to his hut. He hurriedly gathered his wife and five children as silently as possible, descended the stairs and fled towards the SSB camp. Although terrorized, he did turn back to see the ordeal.

Bifen Karketta, aged about 55 years, had come to work in his field like Chaitanya. He had taken shelter in the house of Ari Kumar Rai. He also saw the elephant destroying the house to attack Chaitanya. Bifen must have thought that the elephant would not attack another person or a second house, because he kept on standing in front of Ari's house, hoping to make a quick escape if the elephant turned towards him. But after killing Chaitanya, the elephant rushed towards Bifen with lightning speed. He tried to flee but it was too late, and he was killed outside Ari's house. Unlike in the first case, the house of Ari Kumar Rai was not damaged.

There was another witness to Chaitanya's slaughter. Tika Bahadur Rai, a 35-year-old man, was in his hut, which was not more than 300 metres in the southwest direction from the spot where Chaitanya was killed. Tika Bahadur was completely hypnotized by the bone-chilling sight. He had forgotten about his own safety. Instead he was just watching the inevitable. According to him, the pachyderm continued its assault for at least three minutes; kicking, grinding, trumpeting, and striking with its knee bent for greater impact. It then stamped on Chaitanya's body with its foot for about eight to ten times. A spine-chilling guttural muffled growl reverberated all around. He described the elephant's sound different from the normal trumpet of an elephant. Though difficult to explain exactly, it could be said to have sounded like a sputtering automobile engine that had difficulty starting on ignition. Ari Kumar also corroborated Tika Bahadur's story and narrated that when he and his wife turned back, they saw the beast striking, smashing, stamping, and pulverizing Chaitanya. Later on, Chaitanya's head and his severed limbs were recovered.

Tika Bahadur and a few other villagers, who were watching the Chaitanya getting killed, noticed the elephant moving to attack Bifen within a gap of five minutes. After that attack, they could wait no more. They raised an alarm and all the villagers began to run towards the SSB camp. None could see how the elephant attacked and killed Bifen. The people shouted out to Bifen. There was no response. However, nobody dared to wait and rescue Bifen. His entire body was recovered later and was crushed flat.

Seeing the elephant charging so fiercely, the occupants of other huts also began to flee. They began to warn one another and started running helter-skelter towards the SSB camp. Whoever saw the elephant got horrified. Even others, who just heard the roar-like trumpet, were petrified. They did not know what to do. They did not know where to go. In the open ground, they were totally unsafe in front of a marauding elephant. Inside these flimsy wooden structures, called houses, it was even more unsafe. The people deserted all their huts in Tukra basti in search of a safer place. There was no *paccā* building. The only place that they could think of for protection was the SSB camp, which was nearly one kilometre north and slightly east.

The entire village of Tukra basti had congregated in the camp. An SSB camp is a highly protected area. Nobody is allowed entry without proper permission. A trespasser is warned against such entry. The guard is instructed to open fire against an intruder even without warning if the situation so permits. The villagers also knew this. They never attempted to venture inside. But that day the situation was totally different. The guard had sensed the emergency. He did not object to the entry of the villagers. The SSB personnel had also heard the alarm call. They themselves were in a panic. They were well prepared against human invaders. But against an elephant, they did not know what to do. They had forgotten the basic safety instructions. The disciplined force had become as disorderly as the village crowd. They were not concerned about the safety of the armoury. The arms and ammunition were well within the reach of the villagers. There was no barrier in between. But the villagers were not there to vandalise the camp. They had assembled there to seek help. Unable to provide help, the SSB personnel joined the villagers in shouting and producing as much noise as possible by beating corrugated galvanised iron (CGI) sheets, by clapping and other means they could think of to deter the elephant.

This elephant was behaving unusually audaciously. It followed the fleeing crowd. The loud noise created at the SSB camp did not seem to frighten it. Rather it could be said that the noise attracted the elephant as it darted in the direction of camp. On the way, it attacked a hut approximately 150 metres southwest from the SSB camp. The villagers thought that the elephant was venting its anger on the empty hut. But as they found out later, they were wrong. The elephant had suspected correctly that a person was hiding there and continued its mischief. An old man, the husband of Joymoni Oraon, was in fact hiding in the hut.

GD Goliram was the Sub-Inspector and Officer-in-Charge of the camp. Seeing the situation getting out of control, he ordered for aerial fire to scare away the elephant. Two rounds were fired from a 7.62 mm SLR. The beast did not budge even then. Goliram then ordered the firing of a flare in the sky. It shone bright red. To the bewilderment of all, the flare of the fire greatly quickened the animal, as if the fire had electrified the beast. It charged straight at the camp. Horrified and stunned, the crowd ran helter-skelter. What followed was a dreadfully terrifying killing spree spanning over a quarter of an hour.

It was about 1315 hours. Goliram was the most accurate witness to the gruesome act of the killer for the next fifteen minutes. Goliram was a dark complexioned forty-year old, slightly obese personnel of SSB. He was about five and a half feet tall. He was dressed only in half-pants when the killer beast charged the camp. There was an old hump of accumulated shingles and small-sized boulders at a distance of about 15-20 feet from the trench of the camp on its northern side. This irregular shaped longish hump was 10 feet long, 6 feet wide and 3 feet high. Some waist-high *Lantana* bushes had grown sparingly on it. The overall cover was scanty. Goliram could not run fast. Along with Dinesh Chakraborty, Goliram hid himself in the sparse *Lantana* growth on the boulder hump. Dinesh, a 54 years old man was a cook at the SSB camp. Both lay side by side with their heads at the top of the hump and their bodies on the slope. The elephant was

moving towards the camp at a rapid pace. Dinesh was wearing a white vest and a pair of half-pants. The conspicuous white vest could attract the pachyderm. So Goliram asked Dinesh to take it off. Dinesh followed the instruction while still in cover. His act probably did not remain unnoticed, but the animal looked to be in a hurry. It instead charged the tents and hit three of the tents. The grocery ration was stored in one of them. It did not bother to stop even for its favourite grocery items.

During the chaos when everyone ran haphazardly, Ari Kumar, Tika Bahadur and Joseph Tirki ran towards a Pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa*) on the fringe of tea bushes at about 100 metres away from the camp. While the elephant was still in the camp, both Ari Kumar and Tika Bahadur had climbed up the Pipal tree. Tika Bahadur was carrying along his one-year-old son. He had tied his son on his back in the local traditional method.

Goliram was lying motionless on the hump among the *Lantana* bushes. His body was half exposed. At that moment, Goliram heard somebody shouting. The elephant headed straight towards the Pipal tree and dashed against it.

Joseph Tirki, a resident of Tukra basti, was hiding in the tea bushes. He was a 15 year-old teenager. His fore and middle fingers were joined in both hands since birth. Similarly, his big toe was joined with another toe on both his feet. This disability made him a poor tree climber. He always envied his friends who could move among the branches of trees with ease. That day, his envy had turned into desperation. Ari Kumar and Tika Bahadur knew of this handicap. They still suggested that Joseph clamber up a tree. They assured him that they would pull him up. But Joseph could not muster the courage in so short a time. He did not try to run either. Had he run, he could have possibly reached a safe distance. Instead, he chose to hide in the tea bushes. Minutes later, after the elephant had dashed against the Pipal tree once, it suddenly changed its direction and moved towards Joseph. When he found the attack inevitable, Joseph cried for help against the impending danger. His voice was not heard a second time. The beast was too quick. Instead of a human voice, there was a sound of howling and trumpeting. Ari Kumar and Tika Bahadur were closely and clearly watching the ghastly episode. Joseph was killed at a distance of about 40 metres from the Pipal tree on which they were sitting. They saw that the body of Joseph was so severely crushed that even his head could not be traced later on. Only his crushed torso, severely mangled legs and arms wrenched from the body could be recovered. Other body parts were missing.

Immediately after killing Joseph, the elephant turned back 180 degrees towards the SSB camp. On the way, it drew water in its trunk from a small man-made canal of the adjoining tea garden to shower itself. At this point, a woman appeared from nowhere at a distance of about 70 metres from the SSB camp on the northwest side. It was Joymoni Oraon, aged 57 years. She was hard of hearing. She did not hear the warning yells of the villagers. She continued with her daily chore without knowing that she had come too close to the elephant. In no time, the elephant caught and killed her. Later on when her body parts were recovered, her upper body and one of her arms were untraceable.

After killing Joseph and Joymoni, the elephant moved to the Pipal tree and again dashed against it. Ari Kumar and Tika Bahadur tightly clasped the branches. Tika's son, on the contrary, let out a piercing cry. The sound of the shrill cry unnerved Tika Bahadur more than the deadly trumpet of the elephant. He thought that his son had slipped from his back and he tried to hold on more tightly to his baby. But then he recovered his wits. He could not afford to pay all his attention to his son. A little slip-up and he could have landed in front of the deadly giant. In a terrified voice, he tried to reassure the child. Probably the baby could feel the gravity of the situation, because his cry turned into a frightened sob, which began to fade away with every push of the elephant against the tree.

Frustrated because of a few failed attempts, the elephant gave a terrifying trumpet. It turned back towards the camp following the same track from where it had come earlier. On the way, it again sprinkled itself with water. Then it moved west. Suddenly it took a right turn and moved towards the camp. At that time, the elephant was at a distance of about 60 metres from where Goliram and Dinesh were hiding. It darted straight towards the hump where Goliram and Dinesh were barely concealed. Their legs up to the lower thighs were protruding out of the cover. Dinesh was on the northern side from the direction of the approaching elephant. Goliram and Dinesh continued lying motionless. Initially they thought that the elephant did not notice them. But the elephant was moving straight towards them. When the beast was seven to eight metres away, Goliram became paralyzed with fear. His senses failed to act. On the contrary, Dinesh got up, crossed over the hump and began to run eastwards. The elephant had just stepped over the hump but suddenly turned left to chase Dinesh. Due to this abrupt change in direction, it stumbled slightly on a loose boulder. It took a few seconds for the beast to recover. Dinesh got a few extra seconds of his life. The stumbling had little effect on the movement of the monster and it immediately recovered. Dinesh was a gout patient. He ran the fastest race of his life. Yet, his speed was no match for the chasing demon. At a distance of about forty metres from the hump the killer struck him.

Lying nervously among the *Lantana* bushes on the hump, Goliram was helplessly watching all this. He had dodged death by a couple of metres. He was completely transfixed. His brain had stopped functioning. He was unable to think of what to do. He had a rifle. But his limbs had become numb. He, however, was aware of what was happening. While narrating this brutal episode, mental anguish was clearly visible on his face. According to him, when the elephant closed in on Dinesh, the beast hit him with his trunk to render him senseless. Then it struck Dinesh with a violent downward jerk of its head, smashing the victim with the huge impact of its lower jaw. It smashed Dinesh's body with its foot as if digging into the ground. Due to impact of the powerful strike, the limbs of Dinesh got severed and along with some other body parts were thrown backwards. Without turning back, the beast stepped back to reach these body parts. It crushed these parts with as much force as possible. It then moved forwards to smash the remaining body parts. It stepped back to crush the bloodied mass into a pulp. For greater impact, the animal crouched on its front legs several times using its knees to grind the body parts scattered on the

ground into a paste. It used its lower jawbone to mangle the flesh intermittently using the inner side of the base of the trunk. During the assault on the body remains, the pachyderm moved forward and backward along a stretch of about 20 metres. All this time, it made blood-curdling guttural grunts. At about 1335 hours, the elephant gave a long and deep throated trumpet and left the SSB camp.

The elephant returned to Nipania forest through the same path from which it came, as if it was following its own footprints. It again struck the hut which it had attacked previously and where Joymoni's husband was hiding in Tukra basti. But its ferocity was missing.

Goliram was traumatized. He suffered from horrific hallucinations. A few questions kept gnawing at him. Why was he spared? Was it his good luck? Had the elephant not noticed him because he was lying motionless? Or had the elephant presumed him to be dead and it was targeting only the living. However, no one had any answers to his questions. The continuous shouting of the villagers brought him out of his trance-like state.

As soon as the elephant returned back to the forest, Goliram contacted Siliguri police over RT. He also informed the Officer-in-Charge of the Naxalbari Police Station. He then immediately climbed up the Pipal tree for safety and for observing the movement of the elephant. As soon as he climbed up the tree, at 1345 hours he saw the elephant running east on the Nipania-Marapur road towards Khal basti of Marapur Tea Garden. This non-metalled road runs on the northern periphery of the Nipania block with Tukra basti and Marapur tea bush area flanking it on either side. The message of the elephant gone berserk immediately reached the Naxalbari Police Station and Panighata Range Office.

Shortly, the elephant reached Khal basti. According to SK Dutta, Manager, Marapur Tea Estate, the elephant broke open the door of a *paccā* house to enter inside. In a state of terror, the occupants of the house had taken shelter on the roof. The elephant was making an attempt to grab one of them. When it failed in its attempt, it smashed open a nearby hut. From the house, it caught Issue Xalxo, a 50 year-old man at 1355 hours. He was the sixth unfortunate victim. The killing took place in front of the labours of the Marapur Tea Gardens. They were furious at the inaction of the Forest Department.

SK Dutta, Manager of the tea garden reported that he was a witness to the killing of Xalxo. He said that the elephant also used its jaws to kill its victim. He reported that he had seen the elephant munching on the flesh of Xalxo. It is important to mention that except him, no other person reported seeing the beast eating the flesh of the persons killed. The bodies of the victim in their entirety could not be recovered and this statement added to the mystery of missing body parts. Ari Kumar and Tika Bahadur had clearly witnessed the grisly death of Joseph. They also described the entire incident. There was no discrepancy in their statements. But there was no mention of the man-eating propensity of the elephant. Similarly, Goliram was also close to the spot where Dinesh was killed. From his vantage position on the raised ground, he could see the elephant killing Dinesh very closely. He also did not see the elephant eating human flesh. Nor did he see the elephant eating maize or banana or any other food ration.

In a little more than a quarter of an hour, a team of four forest staff reached Marapur Tea Estate. They received a hostile welcome from about two hundred labours of the tea garden. Armed with sickles and other local arms, they threatened the team of Panighata Range. They were shouting 'kill them...kill them'. They were pouring out their anger on the forest staff, whom they presumed to be the 'owners' of the wild beast. The public was furious at the rogue elephant, which they wanted to be exterminated forthwith. They were in no mood to listen to any arguments. Only when the staff expressed their inability to do so due to technical reasons and assured that hunters had been called, were they placated. Yet they demanded the elephant be immediately driven back.

The horde was boiling with rage. A group of angry youth was extremely hostile. A young man in his twenties, wearing a pant held on to his waist with a string and an old vest wrapped over his bony skeleton, was the most volatile, probably due to the alcohol flowing through his veins. He was waving his sickle threateningly. A few prominent people, whom the crowd seemed to respect, rebuked him. He was forcibly pulled back. These prominent persons did not look like political stalwarts. They had no political axe to grind. Their anger appeared to be an instantaneous reaction to the carnage.

Within a short time, the staff had gathered substantial information on the rampage. However, they were unable to connect the loose ends. They wanted to collect a little more information. Till then, they wanted to keep a safe distance from the elephant that was killing every person it saw. Thus, they chose a path, which initially led them away from the elephant. The crowd thought that they were making excuses. Instantly there was an outrage among the people over this decision. They heckled the staff. Police personnel were also on the spot along with the forest staff. They were trying to control the mob. But the public would not listen. So the staff was forced to move towards the elephant.

After committing mischief, the elephant had already left the Marapur Tea Estate. Taking advantage of the deserted huts and live hedge fences of the labour lines, it entered upper Khal basti, an area closer to the relatively densely populated Marapur labour line. The upper and lower Khal basti are small hamlets spread over a 100-metre long linear strip in the north-south direction close to a perennial *jhorä*. A dry sparsely vegetated low-lying area, about 50 metres wide, separates these two hamlets from each other. Panighata forest staff was standing on the southernmost tip of the upper Khal basti. They had not yet located the elephant. However, to pacify the crowd, the staff fired in the air to show an intention to deter the elephant away. The elephant was still in the vicinity. The shot from the gun did not discourage it. Instead it was attracted towards the human congregation.

Unaware of the elephant moving towards them, staff members were preparing to burst firecrackers. All of a sudden, the live hedge at a distance of about 10 feet was torn apart. The beast emerged from there to charge at the crowd. The staff was taken completely by surprise. Before they could regain their bearings and find a shelter, the monster charged at them. While others were running, Arun Ghosal, a Ban Shramik (BS) - an unskilled guard employed by the Forest Department, was in the trunk of

the devil. It was 1400 hours and the elephant was attacking its seventh victim. Arun was killed in the same way as all the other victims, except in this case, the entire body of the victim was found. However, the left leg was dismembered.

The elephant thereafter nonchalantly walked back towards Nipania forest, which was about two kilometres across from Marapur Tea Garden.

Even after the death of a BS, the anger of the people against forest staff did not subside. The police hurriedly recovered the head of Xalxo and carried it to take further action. In their haste, it looked as if they were carrying the head as a trophy. This action infuriated the people. They began to pelt stones at the police. A couple of policemen received minor injuries. But the public continued their attack. They also attacked the forest and police vehicles. In their defence, the police had to resort to firing.

After the dispersal of the crowd, the forest and police also left the spot. By this time, other staff from Panighata and Bagdogra had also joined them. Not very far from them, the elephant was waiting. The RO was leading the caravan of vehicles. He was followed by the police vehicle. Seeing the elephant, all the vehicles stopped, and started honking their horns. Despite knowing that they did not have the weapons to tackle this beast, the forest staff fired in the air to scare away the elephant. They noticed that the elephant was behaving in a strange way. While its legs were stationary, the whole body was swinging longitudinally. It was not at all scared of the honking or the report of the gunshot. However, this time the elephant did not try to attack. Seeing no reaction, the staff was in a fix as to what to do. Panic spread among the police. Recognizing the ineffectiveness of the gunfire, the frightened policemen resorted to shooting with their rifles in the most undisciplined manner. The firing did not frighten the killer beast. Yet it did not try to attack them either. Instead it strolled towards Tukra basti again.

The elephant went to a banana grove close to the location of the first attack. The elephant again behaved peculiarly. It uprooted a banana bole, carried it in its trunk for a distance of about 50 metres through an agricultural field across the Nipania-Marapur road to the forest and then threw it there. It then returned back and repeated the same process thrice. Thereafter, on its way from Khal basti to Tukra basti, the elephant ambled along leisurely as if nothing had happened. Only while returning back to the forest when it crossed the deserted SSB camp, it struck a Sintex water tank and the water burst out. When it finally entered the forest it was around 1500 hours. During this period, the forest staff could finally take a close look at the elephant. It had no tusks. They reported it as an 8-9 feet tall *Maknä*. From its shape, they recorded the elephant as a *Kumrobandh* with brush tail. They took the measurements of the impression of its pad. For the first time, they had been able to record the identifying features.

They had not been able to identify the sex of the animal. Yet they presumed it to be a male elephant. Their experience with previous elephant pillaging suggested so. The state of West Bengal suffers from several elephant depredations every year, where scores of people are killed and large tracts of agricultural crops are damaged. In such depredations, there is a clear pattern. While the herd invariably resorts to crop damage,

the solitary bulls often kill people accidentally when they break the houses for paddy or *handiä*. Accidents also take place when intoxicated villagers brazenly place themselves in front of the pachyderms. A person getting killed by a female elephant is purely accidental and extremely rare. So the staff, even in their dreams, did not imagine it to be a female. Even if a staff or two suggested the possibility of this elephant being female, they were overruled by the majority.

Dealing with the Horror

The last few weeks, prior to this horrific episode, had been very hectic for the DFO. A DFO, with territorial jurisdiction, does not get much opportunity to enjoy holidays. For the officer, relaxing even on a holiday is a rare opportunity. Enjoying a bright summer day in the cool climes of Dow Hill is certainly a luxury. Relatives and friends of a forest officer always return with pleasant memories of their visits to such places. What they do not realize is that they share the best part of the forester's life, which lasts for a very short period.

Dow Hill, a small hamlet adjacent to Kurseong town in Darjeeling district, is situated at an altitude of about 5000 feet. In this high rainfall area, the sky remains covered with clouds almost throughout the year. While sunshine is rare, the weather is very pleasant during the summers. The most important areas under the jurisdiction of Kurseong division are located at lower altitudes. Willingly or unwillingly, the DFO remains confined to the climatically and politically hot areas in the plains. Thus, he was looking forward to some rest. He had decided to take that day off.

After the morning chores, he completed a few other pending household matters. Then he came out to sip tea in his terrace garden and enjoy that beautiful Sunday. *Camellia*, *Azalea*, *Hydrangea* and a variety of flowers were in full bloom. That Sunday, the sky was more or less clear. Some clouds were floating above the far-off mountaintops. The green hills were a beautiful contrast to the snow-clad mountains against the blue sky. Flowers had disappeared from the Rhododendron trees. But this had not spoiled the beauty of the hills.

Sipping his tea, the DFO was listening the birds chirping through the dense foliage. Watching birds of prey soaring in the sky, and little birds flying from one tree to another was very soothing. To make himself comfortable, he ordered a chair in his terrace garden so that he could bask in the mild sun. He was in no mood to do any office work that day. Still he had to open the bundle of files from his office lest there be important files to attend to.

The DFO cleared the urgent files. He was in a leisurely mood. He took his time in the bath. After lunch he was going back to his garden when the telephone rang. It was about 1345 hours on the 23rd of June. The call was from the OC, Panighata Police Station. There was a message about an elephant causing devastation.

Kurseong division had been facing depredation problem for over a century. The problem had increased over the past couple of decades. The biggest handicap was communication. On various occasions, the DFO did not get messages in time, which complicated the matter. Mobile services had been introduced in North Bengal a few years ago. In those days even receiving calls put a big hole in the pocket. However, for better communication in a crisis situation and due to constant pressure by the staff, a DFO was forced to purchase four mobile sets - one for himself, one for the ADFO and two for the range officers posted in the elephant depredation area. The mobile services, though not very effective due to

the poor network, still became a useful tool during emergencies. But the elephant depredation situation did not ease. The problems continued to multiply.

Before he could return the telephone receiver to its cradle, his mobile phone began to ring. It was an RO on the other side. It was his third call. The DFO had not heard the ring. The DFO immediately issued the necessary instructions. The matter was more serious than he could anticipate at that time. However, he did not take the calls lightly. He sent a messenger to call his driver and security guard, who usually accompany an officer on field visits.

The driver was also relaxing when he received the summons from the DFO. However, like any good driver, he had inspected and cleaned the vehicle in the morning as a matter of routine. He had also got some minor repairs done, and filled the petrol tank. He was ready for his duty. Luckily he had his lunch on time. The security guard was also ready in no time. Whatever time was lost was in sending the message to them. The DFO had also briefed his boss over the phone before proceeding to the field visit.

It was about 1530 hours. The DFO had reached the forest area near Tukra basti where the elephant had created havoc. The RO, Panighata and RO, Bagdogra were already there in the field, and they all assembled in the forest. The group soon heard an elephant trumpeting in the forest.

On that day, there was a report of a small herd of four elephants seen loitering in the Nipania forest block at the edge of the Marapur Tea Garden since 0800 hours in the morning. The labours worked in the tea garden without any hindrance or fear of the elephant. It was also noticed that a strong easterly wind was blowing throughout this period. As soon as the wind subsided, the elephants had disappeared.

The particulars about the rampage did not add up with the movement of this small herd of elephants. Wherever there was a killing, there was a solitary elephant. Yet, there was no information about the presence of any solitary elephant in the vicinity. So they took the gathered information with a pinch of salt. They also concluded that the killer was a *Maknä*. There were still various unanswered questions in their minds. Whether the trumpeting they heard was that of the killer elephant? Should they proceed towards the elephant?

Ultimately, even though frightened, they decided to proceed towards the herd. It was 1700 hours by then. They had not yet located the herd. Then the sound disappeared just as suddenly as it had appeared. They did not know what to do or which way to go. An eerie silence began to ring in their ears. Every dark object at a distance looked like an elephant. Slowly, the weariness with uncertainty overcame the fear of the elephant and they proceeded with their duty.

The DFO was in constant touch with the Conservator, his boss. The wildlife wing also geared up for action. Two departmental elephants were requisitioned from Jaldapara Wildlife sanctuary. By midnight, these elephants had reached the Taipu Beat in Bagdogra Range, waiting for an assignment. The latest but still not completely authentic information was that the rogue elephant had entered Nipania-Kolabari forests. Therefore, vigil was enhanced in the fringe area lest the elephant should strike there also. Realizing that the situation may get prolonged, the DFO spared some

staff from patrolling duty at about 1900 hours. He and the rest of his team continued patrolling without rest or food. In the absence of filtered water, the DFO himself drank stream water at least two times without bothering about contamination from germs. The policemen accompanying the forest staff also satisfied their hunger with that water. The killer elephant had not given them opportunity to make an arrangement for food. Fear and frustration had taken over all other requirements. The police personnel had managed to get some *mūri*. All of them shared and consumed this frugal meal while continuing on their assignment.

It was Monday on 24 June 2002. The date had changed but the day was not yet over. The RT stations were working without any break through the night. There was no provision for so much power back up. Immediately, a new battery was ordered from Siliguri. Charged batteries were not easily available there also. Nobody had expected that the operation would continue all night. It was not possible to strain the network indefinitely. Therefore, the RT stations were closed at 0100 hours. The DFO had been patrolling for hours without any lead. There was no information of the rogue elephant.

This was the worst ever report of elephant depredation in North Bengal. Within a span of just one hour, the elephant had relentlessly killed seven persons. That one-hour of horror had created an unnerving and unending tension. Such an incident was beyond anyone's imagination. The people were terrified. The staff was horrified. There was no solution. The police looked to the forest staff. The forest staff had nowhere to look at. Till midnight everyone approached the DFO, Kurseong and sought instructions from him. He was the most senior officer in the field. By midnight he was also drained out. Yet he did not lose his cool. Despite being mentally and physically fatigued, he actively led various teams. He decided to call it a day at night only when he realized the futility of waiting in the field. Moreover, he had to take charge in the morning again. He proceeded towards Tukriajhar. After a quick bite he went to sleep at about 0200 hours.

Some teams continued their duties in the forest. The Sukna mobile range squad had been in the field throughout the night moving in search of the elephant herd from one village to another. Wherever they went, the villagers held them captive and forced them to protect the village from the depredation of the elephant. They were allowed to proceed only when the local people felt that the elephant would not return to their village. Based on the information from villagers, they proceeded in the direction of the killer elephant. They reached a village from where an elephant herd had just passed after doing some damage. The villagers were furious, as the staff had reached late. Some local goons grabbed the opportunity to settle old scores. They jeered at the staff. One of them even tried to manhandle the staff. However, by late night the situation began to normalize. The people retired for the night. But this unrest had deprived the staff from taking any rest.

At Tukriajhar, the DFO had thrown himself on the bed. In no time, he was fast asleep. Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. Initially, he thought that he was dreaming. But when the frequency and loudness began to increase, he had no option but to wake up. Annoyed, he opened the

door. The staff reported to him that the elephant had killed two persons in Chenga basti. The DFO saw his watch, and calculated that he had slept for about half an hour. It was still in the early hours of 24 June, 2002. Dawn was still too far. Yet, he knew that a new day had started. He was on his way to Chenga basti, dozing in the vehicle.

At Chenga basti Bir Bahadur Rai was killed around 0215 hours. He was a 76 year-old retired Forest Guard, suffering from night blindness. The beast picked him when he was asleep in the balcony of his raised hut. His body was torn apart in four pieces. Soon after, his wife Bishnu Maya Rai, aged around 60 years, was also killed. Probably, she was also picked from the same place. The killer elephant had flung her body, breaking her spinal cord. There was no witness to clarify whether it was the same elephant. However, the measurement of the impression of the pad matched with the earlier measurements of the killer elephant. Cows and goats were also present in the same hut. The elephant did not harm them.

A day of uncertainty

By the time the DFO completed the investigation in Chenga basti, it was morning. In the meantime, a few new teams joined the patrolling team. Some of the old teams were relieved. Before letting them off, the DFO collected as much information as possible. But all this information also could not give any clue about the location of the elephant nor was it helpful in making decisions on the next course of action.

The CF of the Hill Circle was overseeing the problem. Seeing the situation still out of control, he had also arrived in the field. He was constantly collecting information from the DFO and relaying it to the senior officers. In the morning, the DFO, Wildlife-Darjeeling also joined in the field. On his arrival, he immediately called on DFO, Kurseong. Both the DFOs discussed the various angles of the incidents of the previous day. More discussion led to more confusion. There was utter chaos wherever the story of the killer elephant reached. There was bedlam everywhere. Yet the DFOs maintained their calmness. At places, the staff were heckled and taunted. Still, they did not show any irritation.

The staff from far-off jurisdictions also reported on duty. These staff were asked to patrol the human habitations outside the forest. They were assigned the task of collecting whatever information they came across. They were also asked to take the villagers into confidence to reduce the hindrance in their work. The local staff screened the entire area of Kolabari and Nipania Reserved Forest areas and Tatari Panighata Resume Forest. They could not locate the elephant in the forest. The herd, which was spotted at the boundary of Marapur, was also untraceable. The team then conducted a thorough search in the northern half of the Bagdogra range. The elephant could not be located anywhere. It looked as if the killer elephant was present anywhere and everywhere in the western *duars*. There was a panic in the entire region. Information on the presence of the elephant at various places began to flow in. Filtering the correct information from the noise was a herculean task.

To add to the mayhem, antisocial elements began to spread rumours. They criticized the inaction of the Forest Department. They wanted immediate elimination of all the elephants. A wave of antipathy against the Forest Department had developed. The families of the staff in the interior locations were in a state of distress. All the male members had moved out on elephant duty. Only women, children and some old men were left to guard the forest campus. They were apprehensive that on the instigation of the miscreants, there could be a mob attack on them. The atmosphere was so volatile that there was every possibility of a backlash. A small mistake or even a little hint anywhere could provoke the mob into burning the campus to the ground.

Just a year ago, all the staff residences and office buildings in Salugara Forest Range were set on fire in spite of the presence of a police picket. A police camp had been established there to help in forest protection. Except the clothes they were wearing, the staff lost everything. The only item recovered later on was a pair of sandals, which had slipped

out of the feet when a woman was running for her life. A few lone slippers were also found. The flare up was the result of firing in which one person was killed. Most surprisingly, there was no attack on the Beat location, which was in the vicinity of the affected village. The attack on the Salugara range was not an instantaneous reaction from the public. A few miscreants had used an adverse media report to assemble a large crowd from Siliguri town, and tried to instigate violence. The mob consisted of only young and middle-aged men. The composition of the crowd was enough to indicate that they were hoodlums. The local public was there mostly as onlookers watching the mob go berserk.

In spite of the elephant killing so many people in an unprecedented manner, the media had not blamed the staff for any lapse this time. The incident happened in such short time that the usual rabble-rousers did not get sufficient time to stir up trouble against the forest staff. This was a big relief for the family members of the forest staff. Yet they were not safe until the elephant was finished off.

On the other hand, advice from some NGOs, sitting in their AC chambers in the distant metropolitan cities, started creating complications. These NGOs were against shooting of the elephant without proper investigation and identification. Technically, they were correct. In the past also, rogue elephants had started behaving normally after rampaging, and there was a possibility that the killer elephant would be calmed after some time. However, what the NGOs did not realize was that death sentence to the elephant had already been awarded by the public. If the Forest Department did not kill it, the public would take matters into their own hands, and many more elephants would be killed indiscriminately. In addition, many forest areas would be plundered and a number of staff assaulted by the mob.

There were also bizarre solutions from wildlife quacks. A few wanted that the forest area where the elephant had taken shelter be fenced. Some suggested that walls should be erected throughout the forest boundary to restrict the animal within the forest. Others advised that the Department should plant Agave because the elephant would avoid entering the thorny areas. Every time any elephant causes destruction, there are expert comments that there is shortage of food in the forest. Nobody is ready to listen to the fact that there is virtually no depredation during dry periods when there is a higher probability of scarcity of fodder in the forest. The media propagating these absurd theories compounds the problem. This is readymade fuel for local rogue elements to incite the public against the Forest Department. Such propaganda against the forest staff not only creates hurdles in forest working but also aggravates depredation problem since the staff is obstructed from reaching the spot in time. Moreover, whoever has not been able to extract undue favours from the forest officers, invents stories about corruption among all foresters.

This current problem was a nightmare for the forest staff. Although extremely busy tracing the killer elephant, they were being blamed for inaction. The elephant had created so much panic that rumours started flying thick and fast even to faraway areas. Within a day, there were a number of bizarre stories about the elephant. For some people, it was a ghost taking the shape of an elephant during the day and turning into a

man at night. In some other area, the elephant was a curse of god and the people were being convinced to make peace offers to take the scourge away. There were as many versions as there were tongues. There were still other people genuinely interested in helping who would pass on correct information about the movement of the elephant. However, roadblocks at various places hindered movement. The presence of the police insured that things did not come to a complete halt, but there were still unnecessary delays. The staff would follow the leads provided by people assiduously, but by that time the elephant would be miles away. Needless to say, only the forests tracts provided unhindered routes. But at the slightest movement of any object in the jungle, the staff would get unnerved. However, the staff still felt more comfortable moving in the forest even in the face of death because there was complete chaos outside the forest.

There was a lot of anxiety in the Darjeeling foothills. The morning started with a tense atmosphere. Nobody knew what the solution was. Two departmental elephants were already on the mission. Two more elephants were requisitioned as this killer elephant was proving to be elusive. However, this current generation of departmental elephants was not as dependable or courageous as the previous one. Jatra Prasad, one of the most faithful departmental elephants of the previous generation was one such elephant, who often penetrated a herd of wild elephants without any fear and who once forced a charging tiger to retreat. Almost all other elephants would have bolted in such circumstances. Lal Bahadur, Jatra Prasad's cohort, was also bold but he was a bit erratic. Even a few hours before his death, when he was not able to raise even his trunk, he made a futile attempt to kick a staff. No other departmental elephant in the present generation was fit to be spoken in the same breath as some of the legendary elephants of the previous one.

The situation was grave. A meeting was conducted at Bengdubi Forest Rest House. Apart from senior officers of the Forest Department, the SP, Darjeeling attended the meeting along with his subordinate officers. The IG Police was also present in the meeting. His personal initiative had made all the difference. So his presence in the field was a big boost to the morale of the field staff. Yet the police was also helpless. The meeting was delayed due to the absence of DFO, Kurseong.

The DFO had been obstructed on the way by a group of people. They requested him to take a deputation in view of the current situation, where they felt that the government had not taken any remedial action. Had the DFO not cooperated, the requests would have turned into an order. The police, accompanying him, made an attempt to defer the deputation to no avail. The DFO then sat with them and narrated what they had been doing till then. Some hoodlums in the crowd tried to fish in the troubled waters. A few respected elders in the community silenced them. Yet the people wanted some commitments. The DFO assured them that the beast would be eliminated within a day. Only then was he allowed to leave the place. The DFO knew it was beyond his capacity to fulfil the promise. He, therefore, spared a staff from patrolling duty, and asked him to take the local leaders into confidence to avoid any ugly situation on the next day. Two more staff were sent to other sensitive places. The DFO himself was in the field without any break - without food, water or sleep.

The DFO reached Bengdubi Rest House about an hour late. Being the senior-most officer in the field continuously on the job, everybody was eagerly waiting for information from him. The information from him however, could not be put to any use. The only solution at that moment was to kill the elephant. But how? Every hour counted. A little delay and a few more lives would be lost. The army was contacted. They had enough ammunition to blow the elephant to pieces. But even a small mistake could have terrible consequences. The only silver lining was that the full moon assisted a night operation.

A retired army officer, who had been collaborating with forest officers since a long time, was requested to extend his services to shoot down the elephant. It was decided to keep a watch on both the banks of the Balasan River. A combined team of forest and police departments led by DFO, Kurseong, DFO, Wildlife-Darjeeling and Addl. SP, Siliguri kept a watch on Mechi bed from Surjabhar to Zero point close to Tukra basti. Another team was led by RO, Bamanpokhri to keep watch on Bamanpokhri-Rakti-Simulbari stretch. All the ranges of Kurseong and Wildlife-Darjeeling divisions were on duty. Even the staff from the hills, posted far from any elephant habitat, were brought in for this emergency duty.

In addition to these two main teams, many small teams were created. They were assigned the responsibility of screening all forest blocks from the Nepal border in the west to Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary in the east. The teams were monitoring the forests for the killer elephant. Almost all the members in the patrol party had encountered elephants hundreds of times during their service. Many of them had been born and brought up seeing wild elephants. They had thus developed a lot of affection for these creatures of the wild. But that day, they did not want to see any elephant, let alone the killer elephant. The circulating stories had filled them with dread. They were moving in the forest on foot, in vehicles and on the backs of the departmental elephants. The screening on the elephant-back was comparatively safe. Yet those on elephant-backs had the toughest task to perform. They had to enter all those patches where penetration through other means was impossible. However, their only fear was that should the wild elephant charge, the domestic elephant might bolt. This bolting of frightened departmental elephants often leads to serious injuries. The patrolling on foot, on the contrary, was very scary.

The staff was treading carefully, taking all precautions. They did not want the killer elephant to spot them. On their way, a few teams saw some other wild elephants also. That day every adult elephant looked like a monster. On observing the wild elephants, they tried to slip away as silently as possible. In spite of their quiet movement, they did not remain unnoticed by these wild inhabitants of the forest. Absence of any reaction from these elephants was the only evidence that none of them was the wanted elephant. Once out of reach, the patrol felt more secure. But there was no rest for the weary. They again moved in another direction towards an unknown destination in search of the killer beast.

On their way from one forest patch to another, they also crossed human habitations outside the forest area where they relaxed a bit. But there, they were harassed. At various places, roadblocks awaited for them. Some people really wanted to help. Others wanted explanations. Onlookers

enjoyed their persecution. The forest criminals had a free hand. They did not hesitate to heckle the staff. The patrol parties faced assault or heckling repeatedly. Even after such hindrance, the staff continued on their venture. A few words of sympathy and appreciation from senior officers were enough to encourage them to continue on their mission. Unlike other occasions, the police provided all possible help.

It was an extremely disorderly day for the field staff. They were traversing between forest patches without any direction or plan. The strain was clearly visible on their faces. None knew what was coming next. On the longest day of their life, the sun had started knocking at the door of the horizon. The fading light indicated the arrival of evening. An evening is the most enjoyable part of the day for a government staff. For these field staff however, it was the most depressing evening. The setting sun had drained their energy. The darkness had brought gloom. Their brains had stopped functioning. Forest staff are generally not afraid of ghosts, as all interior locations are rumoured to harbour ghosts. A significant number of forest officers also claimed having seen ghosts in one location or another. On that day, even the shadows of trees began to frighten the staff.

There was no wind but bats and other nocturnal animals would fly or move among the trees and bushes. A sudden swaying of a plant would send adrenaline flowing through their veins. The staff reached a familiar spot that they had visited not many days ago. On that day at about the same hour, the DFO had noticed two awkward looking objects in a hazy background. Pointing in that direction, he had jokingly remarked, "See. Don't these trees look like elephants?" Everyone smiled in consent. They continued walking before they noticed a movement. The "trees" had begun to shake. It was only then that they realized that the supposed trees were actually elephants. The elephants were not far from them. But luckily, only the backsides of the elephants were facing them. They immediately rushed off from the spot. In spite of the tense atmosphere on June 24th, the memory of that incident brought a faint smile to their faces.

The staff were trying to focus on dark objects. Some of the Rapid Action Force personnel were carrying searchlights in addition to their rifles. But the torch would focus in one direction only. Moreover, there was a fear that the light may attract the elephant. So they were using the light sparingly. Due to the constant switching on and off of the light, they were finding it difficult to focus their eyes. Slowly, the full moon began to brighten the sky. The moonlight encouraged the staff. Even after the daylong search, there was no further information about the rogue elephant. Therefore, almost everyone assumed that the problem was over. Yet, the staff continued to patrol throughout the night.

Terror across the border

North Bengal was on high alert. Nine deaths had been recorded by the end of the 24th day of June. The elephant had killed seven persons within an hour on the previous day, the 23rd. It had then disappeared into the forest. It suddenly reappeared in the dead of the night at another place on the 24th. It killed two persons there. By the time people could think of taking guard, it had disappeared again. It was not clear whether the elephant had changed its strategy or if it was taking rest in the evening. The only possibility was that it had taken shelter in the nearby forest till midnight. For this also, there were no conclusive evidences. After the night attack, the elephant had disappeared again. It was not very clear whether it was part of a herd or if it was a loner.

Miles away, inhabitants of Bamandangi village in Nepal also heard distorted versions of the killing episodes. Just half a century ago, this area was a continuous patch of dense forest in which elephant herds used to take shelter on their migration route between north Bengal and Nepal. In the nineteen sixties, during the malaria eradication programme, there was large-scale resettlement of people from the upper hills to this Nepal *terai* region. In no time, the vast tracts of forests in the *terai* region were converted into agricultural fields. As in the Indian *duars*, in Nepal also, man had destroyed in a few decades what God had created in millions of years. The wild animals inhabiting these forests succumbed to the onslaught of civilization because of the loss of food and shelter. Those that survived were exterminated.

In India and Nepal, elephants have traditionally been treated with great esteem due to religious reasons. But religious sentiments would instantaneously disappear when elephants started raiding their agricultural crops. In India, due to somewhat effective law and order situation, people in general avoid attacking elephants. On the contrary, Nepal passed through a phase of political uncertainty through most of the 2000s. With increasing political instability, arms began to flow to the public. People began to use firearms against the elephants without any inhibition. Miscreants taking advantage of public distress began to spread rumours that the elephants, causing problem in Nepal, were Indian elephants. Instead of restricting people from using firearms and launching awareness campaigns, the Nepalese police and armed forces joined hands with them to launch an assault against innocent elephants. The pachyderms were captured, electrocuted, poisoned and fired at from time to time in Nepal and also in India sporadically. Despite continuous attack on their home, the elephants somehow manage to live on by migrating from one place to another.

The elephants, on their normal migration route, move into Nepal every year. After bullet injuries, they return back to West Bengal and take shelter in the forests of Kurseong division. Unable to control their desire to return to their homeland, and thinking that the problem is over, these inhabitants of the forests move to Nepal again. The elephants then make an unscheduled return back to West Bengal after the onslaught in Nepal. The border forests are not able to sustain such a large population of

elephants for a long time. These circumstances then force the elephants to explore new areas for shelter.

The returning elephants are the biggest problems for the staff in India. Firstly, some elephants injured in bullet fire succumb to the injury and die in West Bengal forests. The local staff, within whose jurisdiction the animals die, have to explain the circumstances of death. Secondly, with every death, their performance is scanned. Were they patrolling? Had they collected the information in time? Had they taken proper action subsequently? Had senior officers visited the spot or not?

In West Bengal, the elephant management is given a lot of importance. To tackle the elephant depredation problem, various measures have been taken by the wildlife wing of the state. Wildlife squads have been created in the affected areas to handle the elephant depredation problem. In vulnerable areas, elephant-proof electric fencings are erected. Moreover, with Joint Forest Management picking up, relations between the people and the forest staff have improved substantially. Not only do the forest staff stand by the people, but there are also examples where the people themselves have extended help to staff during difficult situations.

The situation is a little different in Nepal, where people have to fend for themselves against the depredation by elephants. Compared to Indians, they are very poor and there are not many employment opportunities either. The agricultural productivity is quite low. With the existing crop output, people find it difficult to sustain their livelihoods. Starvation is not uncommon. A drought or any other natural calamity can cause further misery. They certainly cannot afford additional damage caused by the elephants. Although a routine occurrence, elephant depredation is like rubbing salt on their wounds. There is no provision to compensate their losses. Compensation is not paid in India either but the *ex gratia* payment to the victims acts as a balm to reduce their anguish.

On that day, the inhabitants of Bamandangi village had no inkling that a series of misfortune was imminent. As usual, they were busy in their routine affairs. Mani Bahadur was in his agriculture field since morning, busy harvesting his maize crop.

There were vast tracts of agriculture fields in this region of the Himalayan foothills. Small hamlets were scattered here and there among the fields. These people grew mainly paddy and maize, which the elephants were fond of. Two days back, they had driven a herd out of the country. They were very happy. They thought that the elephants would not bother them for the next few weeks. At least there was no fear that the Indians would drive them back.

Mani Bahadur had been hearing a number of different stories since the previous evening. For him, the herd had split into various splinter groups spread over Bengal. Scores of people had been killed. One of such splinter herd had reached up to Kurseong town, where many houses had been damaged. For fear of legal implications, the people there were unable to take any action. Everyone added his own embellishment to the story before passing it on to the next person. Mani was sure that the elephants would not enter Nepal. Suddenly his attention was diverted by a noise.

Mani Bahadur raised his head. He did not see anything unusual. Before he could seek clarification from people in the nearby field, there was chaos. People began to run in one direction. They were making as loud a noise as possible. The area reverberated with the sound of “*Haathi.....Haathi*”. He had still not sighted the elephant. Yet he also joined in the clamour. He himself did not know why he was running with everyone. The only reason he could think of was that he felt safe in a group. Suddenly, the people came to a halt. He also stopped. A small herd of elephants was coming in their direction. Their shouts turned into whispers. The loud shouting of people from the other side of the village had not subsided. Mani’s group began to shout at the peak of their voices again. The elephants were still marching forward as if they were deaf to the screaming all around them. People started bursting crackers to scare away the elephants. The elephants stopped. Suddenly, there was a sound of gunfire from the village. There were two more rounds of fire. There was a mixed reaction from the herd. The elephants were still hundreds of metres away, yet they began to retreat from the village. One elephant, however, was undeterred. It kept marching towards the village. Slowly, the loud yells from the other side began to increase and with that the speed of the elephant.

The sound of firing had stopped. The sound of crackers bursting was still resonating in the air. The village was still far away. The elephant turned and with an aggressive stance, it threatened the crowd. The elephant was not very close. Yet, they were within its striking range. Probably the elephant was in the process of selecting a person for attack. Suddenly, there was another round of fire from the village. It seemed as though the elephant was energised. With lightning speed, it charged towards the village. In the village, Shaila hid himself in a room on the first floor of a house. The elephant pushed at the house with a jerk. The entire house began to sway. Shaila clasped a pole firmly. A woman was also present in that house, cooking something in the kitchen. Because of the jerk, she could not maintain her balance, and in the process her clothes caught on fire. In a panic, she could not put out the fire, and she ran toward the veranda instead. The elephant instantly lifted her in its trunk without bothering about the flames. Smashing her to the ground, it crushed her with its forelegs, thus extinguishing the fire. The beast then charged at her with its jaws.

Shaila was terribly frightened by this horrific scene. He thought that he could be the next target of the invincible fiend. Acting on a reflex, he leaped out of the rear window, which was about twelve to thirteen feet above the ground. For fear of a serious injury, he had never dared to jump from there in the past. But that day he did not bother about the height. While jumping, a wooden splinter pierced the artery on his wrist. A jet of blood squirted out of his hand. In no time, he had lost more than a glassful of blood. This accident in itself was enough to unnerve even a mentally strong person. But the fear of the elephant overcame the pain in his wounded forearm. He tightly held his injured hand and continued running. Some other people were also running with him. They had seen him getting injured. But for fear of the elephant, no one could gather enough courage to help him. They had covered a distance of more than a hundred metres,

when suddenly Shaila collapsed to the ground. The blood again started gushing out. The other people by then had gathered a little courage to help him. Still panting, one person tore his shirt and bandaged Shaila's wrist. The flow of blood was almost stanching.

In the meantime, after Shaila had fled from the house, there was no one to witness the misdeed of the elephant that was trumpeting in a strange choked way. In the post-incident narration, the villagers could not explain the sound made by the elephant. Later on, the crushed body of the woman was found. One leg was missing. The other leg and arms had been crushed. At the blood smeared spot, an undisturbed trail of blood led towards the head, which was found far away in a battered condition. It looked as if the elephant had kicked it in the air like a football. From circumstantial evidences, it seemed that the beast had kicked the head inadvertently.

After some time, the silence on that end alerted the people around Shaila to the possibility of the elephant searching for a victim again. They decided to desert Shaila. Suddenly, there was a noise from a far-off place. They knew that they were safe. They again focussed on Shaila who was still unconscious. They poured water on his face. With a lot of difficulty he gained consciousness.

After killing the woman, the elephant again shifted its attention to the crowd where Mani was shouting along with the others. Suddenly, the mob found the elephant inside the human ring. Everybody sprinted pell-mell in different directions away from the elephant. Had the elephant tried, a dozen of persons could have died. The pachyderm stood still, watching the crowd. Still in a ferocious mood, it raised its trunk and trumpeted in a nerve-racking guttural tone. It did not seem to be in any hurry, and allowed the crowd to disperse. Mani Bahadur was running for his life. The beast had chosen him as the next target. In the line of the elephant's vision, he was the nearest to the elephant. In spite of his best efforts, he was unable to outpace anyone. Even older women were at a much safer distance.

Mani was only about twenty feet away from the beast and his heart was in his mouth. He was about to give up when there was a miracle. A cow appeared from nowhere and in its haphazard movements jerked Mani a little. Though the jolt was not very strong, Mani could not maintain his balance and fell down. At that instant, the cow was in front of the elephant. With a shudder, the pachyderm changed its direction. It seemed that the elephant did not intend to harm the cow. But in a split second, the elephant had knocked down another person. It then lifted him in its trunk. No one saw what happened thereafter. Mani had been spared. He got up and began to run again. Although he began panting, he continued to run until he fell down. The monster did not chase him. Mani had had a providential escape. He had escaped death by a few seconds, and had been given a second lease of life.

At a far off place, a group of people was watching the assault. They did not see what was actually happening. The maize crop obstructed their view. From the screeches and shrieks they heard, they assumed that a few persons were being pounded to death, not knowing that it was only one hapless person. Only a few people had seen the beast running with a person

in its trunk. Thereafter, they saw it moving away from the spot at a leisurely pace. Later on, the smashed body, with some parts missing, was recovered. The elephant did not make further attempts to attack them. It continued in another direction and then disappeared from their sight.

A few furlongs away, Dampar Bahadur Rai was busy in his agriculture field. He was a mentally disabled person, though he could perform most functions normally. He did not take any notice of the noise. At a short distance from him, three elephants were busy in the maize field. Dampar did not bother about the herd. Elephants also did not pay attention to him. A few other people had assembled at a little distance from him. They tried to caution him. He did not pay any heed to them as well. In view of their own safety, none of them dared to go near Dampar to force him away to a safer place. The group was more concerned about another elephant that was on a killing spree. Being more than a kilometre away, they felt safe. In spite of the three elephants in the vicinity, all their attention was focused on the rampage by the lone killer elephant. Though they could not see anything, they could hear a commotion in the distance. The noise was totally different from the racket they had witnessed a couple of days ago. The sounds of jeering and heckling by the crowd two days ago had turned into wails, screams and shrieks.

After the long ruckus, there was a strange sound. Initially they could not make out what it was. After a series of trumpets of the herd in response, they realized that it was the call of the killer elephant. The staccato did not have any frightening notes. But together with the trumpeting of the elephants and the screams, it made their hair stand on end. The killer elephant was advancing towards them. The crowd began to scatter. From the other side, the three elephants were hurriedly moving towards Dampar. Some people stopped to see if Dampar would avoid the inevitable attack. They were making all possible efforts to make him move away to safety. To their utter surprise, the elephants instead of attacking him, moved by his side. Two of the elephants passed from one side and the third one from the other side. Everyone in the crowd was breathless. On the contrary, unconcerned with what was happening, Dampar was enjoying the elephants so close to him. A few steps past him, the elephants trumpeted as if to convey that they were more human-like than humans, by sparing a mentally disabled person. By the time the herd had moved some distance away, the killer elephant had joined the herd. Seeing the crowd, the beast charged. The mob scattered in all possible directions. The elephant picked Nirmal Ghimire from the crowd and killed him. Later, the body was found in a mutilated condition. Nirmal was not a resident of the area. He had come to visit one of his acquaintances the previous evening and was going to leave shortly. Just a minute ago, Dampar was on the line of death. Within half an hour, death had spared two persons and chosen another two.

After this incident, the herd disappeared and was never reported again in the region. For rumourmongers, Indian elephants had returned back to where they belonged after killing three Nepalese.

Battering restarted

The date had changed again. At midnight, the third calendar day had started. It was the 25th June. For the staff, the second day had not yet ended. The DFO called the staff. The entire day's exercise had not yielded any results. The available details were filtered, but there was no clear inference. However, there were indications that the killer elephant along with its accomplices had moved to Nepal. After analysing the situation, the DFO decided that the operation should be wound up and restarted in the morning. A few teams were asked to remain vigilant during the night. The rest of the staff was asked to assemble in the morning. By the time the DFO and most of his staff finished for the day, it was about 0200 hours.

At this hour in Amrit basti near Bamanpokhri, Kalu Thapa heard a strange sound of a coughing engine that refuses to start on ignition. He was on the ground floor of his house. Since rumours were rife, everybody was alert in the entire area. He could sense the incoming danger. He asked his sister to rush to the neighbouring hut, which was raised on a platform. But they could not get any reprieve. No sooner had the woman climbed up the stairs, than the elephant attacked that house. She jumped down behind the house and ran towards the adjoining *paccä* house. With a loud trumpet, the killer elephant chased her. Kalu noticed that she was not fast enough to reach to safety. He called at the top of his voice and suggested that she run to another house, which he thought was nearer. Hearing him shout, the elephant turned towards Kalu. He jumped down the slopes of Bamanpokhri terrace deposits and rolled down a fairly large distance. The elephant gave him a fiendish look and began to search for a path to approach him. The elephant skirted a house and a bamboo grove on his way down. Still the slope was too steep for the elephant. Kalu had deceived death. He had saved his sister also.

Suk Bahadur Tamang was also present near the spot. He observed that the elephant was taking a round of a *paccä* house. Several villagers had taken shelter on the terrace of this house. He also saw three to four elephants merrily eating maize just in the vicinity. The herd was not showing any interest in the activity of this killer elephant. At the same time, the killer elephant was not interested in the maize, banana and *tambä* (bamboo shoots) available there.

In no time, this information reached a *Panchayat* member, Pannalal. He immediately telephoned the Bamanpokhri Range Office. The information was in turn transmitted to the Mechi patrol party to quickly rush to Bamanpokhri. Villagers from Bamanpokhri and Amrit basti began to pour into the Bamanpokhri Range Office for safe shelter. The ADFO and the Range Officer made necessary arrangements for them and proceeded to trace the herd. They were moving in the dark through the maize crop in the field. The crop was mature and corns had started becoming hard. The overhanging inflorescence of the crop obstructed their vision. They were scared lest the elephants hidden in the field should appear all of a sudden. They all had been informed that the elephant was attacking by stalking and chasing its victims. They were puzzled with this unknown behaviour of the

elephant. They were moving as quietly as possible. They would take a sigh of relief whenever they reached a point where their vision was not obstructed. They searched in the village also. Once they were sure that the elephants had left the area, they travelled in a vehicle to enter into the forest.

The DFO, Kurseong was dozing in his vehicle. He was on his way to Tukriajhar for the night. He would wake up intermittently. He was under tremendous pressure. He could not relax until a solution was found. He was also relieved that there had been no casualty since the previous night. He was half-asleep, when there was information that the killer elephant had again attempted an attack. In the meantime, DFO, Wildlife from Darjeeling had also joined him. Requesting the DFO, Kurseong to take rest, he took over the command and proceeded towards Bamanpokhri.

The police was also on the alert. The Addl. SP, Siliguri received the information from Bamanpokhri Range Office. As soon as he heard the news, he reached Bamanpokhri with additional force. The forest and police staff rushed towards the village where a woman came wailing to them. She reported that Antare Biswakarma was missing and that she had seen an elephant going towards the forest carrying something in its trunk. The team instantly reached Antare's house and found his body parts scattered here and there. Only parts of his liver, skull and legs were recovered. His arms and torso could not be found. Antare, a sixty-five year old person was the tenth victim of the killer in India. He was picked up from the balcony of his raised hut. As in the previous incidents, the cows and goats present there were not killed. It was about 0345 hours when the staff reached Antare's house. The eyewitnesses reported that the killer animal was an elephant, eight to nine feet high at shoulders. The measurements of the footprints were taken. These also matched with the measurements of the killer elephant's pad taken at other places.

Such unpredictable behaviour of the elephant was quite perplexing. The mention of the presence of herd in the company of the killer elephant had complicated the analysis. In the past, cases had been reported when wild elephants had charged at the searchlights or when firecrackers had been burst. But such cases were sporadic, incident-specific and only momentary. The same elephant that had adhered to charging in one case had been observed to be scared in another case. This killer elephant was the only elephant that was consistent in its manner. It was not scared of fire or light till its death. It had killed people with a single-minded determination.

The decisive moment

Morning had set in. All the four departmental elephants were summoned in Bamanpokhri Range Office. The hunter was also asked to reach there. In the meantime, information was received that a herd of seventeen elephants had crossed over to Mahananda. There was apprehension that the killer elephant could also have crossed over to Mahananda. To confirm this news, it was decided to search the entire Bamanpokhri forest. Part of the screening was done on elephant-back. Another party consisted of forest and police officers in a vehicle, with two double-barrelled guns, one single-barrelled gun and two rifles. The police had never tracked a killer elephant in their life. It was extremely distressing for them to adjust to a completely alien environment. In addition to the fear of the elephant, they found it quite inconvenient to negotiate through an unknown terrain. The only relief to them was the companionship of the forest officials.

After screening the village, they drove to the forest. They entered the Central Road of Bamanpokhri forest in two vehicles. They had hardly gone 500-600 metres inside the forest when they spotted an elephant trail running in the east-west direction. Soon three elephants emerged from the northern side and another appeared from the southern side. From both sides, the elephants began closing in on the vehicles. The party opened fire to scare them away. Hearing the sound of the gunfire, the elephants began to return. But one elephant continued marching forward. Aware of the notoriety of the killer elephant, the investigating party, fearing further ambush, moved away from the elephant. The elephant then entered into the forest. They were not sure whether this was the same group of elephants they were looking for.

After some time, they again saw the elephants at a distance, and they again opened fire to frighten the herd. Three elephants quickly crossed over to the eastern side heading towards Rakti-Mahananda forest and disappeared in the jungle. The fourth elephant behaved very peculiarly. Minutes after the other three had left, it re-emerged on the Central road about a kilometre away from the gate, which is situated at the edge of the forest. The driver switched on the headlight of the vehicle. Seeing the light, the killer began to push forward menacingly. The staff started bursting crackers. The elephant was undeterred. The blank fire from the gun also did not intimidate it. The staff observed that the elephant was attracted towards the gunfire. It was continuously moving towards them. They then tried to contact the DFO, Kurseong on his mobile phone. They could not reach him. The DFO had not slept for two nights. After handing over the task to his wildlife counterpart, he went away to rest. The staff were also performing their duties on rotation. The DFO, Kurseong in consultation with other officers, had made up back plans for the DFO, Wildlife to be in charge in the former's absence. Therefore, the RO sent message to the DFO wildlife, who instructed them to keep a watch on the elephants till his arrival.

The elephant did not provide any respite. Playing hide and seek, it kept getting closer to the investigating party. To avoid undue risk, the party came out of the forest and began to wait at the periphery of the Bamanpokhri forest on the Central Road. After coming out of the forest, the staff had not seen the elephants. It was already noon. They were not sure whether the elephants were still there or had left for some other place. They, therefore, left the road and once again entered the forest on the eastern side, i.e., in the direction in which the other elephants had gone. After some time, they saw the elephant emerging on the road. Thrice, it played a game of hide-and-seek by darting back into the forest and re-emerging on the Central road, each time getting closer to the group.

Initially, the staff thought it to be a normal behaviour of an elephant. Soon, they realised that something was amiss. With every passing moment, their anxiety grew. Slowly, their nervousness turned into a full-blown agitation. They understood that death was approaching them. They were in a fix and wondered whether they should wait for the DFO or move out to a safe distance. They decided to ride a little farther away so that they could escape if the elephant charged. At this moment the DFO, Wildlife reached at the spot along with the hunter.

The unnerved staff breathed easier when they saw the hunter. They again focussed on the elephant that was leisurely approaching them. They could not locate other three elephants, which were still inside the forest. When this elephant reached about a hundred metres from the investigating party, it did not enter the forest. It continued to move steadily on the Central Road towards the staff.

The DFO, his staff, and the hunter were discussing whether it was really the same elephant that had created havoc in the area. They wanted to be sure of killing the right elephant. They did not have to wait long to make a decision. The elephant had given away its identity by swinging its body to and fro along its length, without moving its legs. This single action was not a proof of its identity, and nobody wanted to take any chance. The elephant was continuously on the move. When it reached within a distance of about fifty metres from them, it fanned its ears forward. It began to twist its tail vigorously. It cocked its back to make a charge. All this time, it carried on walking without interrupting its pace. Everybody was spellbound.

The staff rapidly went into action mode. Rifles were ready. If the elephant charged, they would start firing point-blank. Yet they were waiting. The elephant did not bother about the firearms. Suddenly, there was a momentary brake in the movement of the elephant. It was ready to make a dash forward. The hunter knew the right moment to fire. He did not wait for a command. Before the killer beast could gather enough speed for assault, he took position and fired a shot from his 0.375 Magnum. It was 1355 hours. The bullet hit the elephant on the left side of its forehead. The fire instantly put a stop to the movements of the elephant. Moments later, it went down on its knees and collapsed on its right side on the Central Road. It was the end of the 'killer elephant of Bamanpokhri'.

A stunned silence followed the loud report of the rifle. No one could believe that all this had happened so quickly. The elephant had fallen

down on the ground. The moment that the staff had been waiting for had arrived. A few seconds earlier, death had been walking towards them. Although they had faith in the hunter, past experiences of many forest officers with other hunters had not always been good. There had been misfires. A few officers had had miraculous saves. In all those cases, the rogue elephants had been frightened by the sound of the firing and had fled after the incidents. In this case, where the devil incarnate feared nothing, there was no chance of a miracle in case of a misfire. A few casualties were certain. But the bullet hit the bull's eye. Death itself had fallen in front of them.

Was it a time to celebrate? The forest staff certainly felt relieved. They were happy that the anguish and misery of the past couple of days was over. The local Range Officer and a few other staff also felt relieved. The information of the death of the elephant spread like wildfire. The local people also took a sigh of relief. When sanity was restored, and the RO had time to contemplate, the kindness in his heart struck his conscience. In the past, a chasing elephant had spared him when he had fallen on the ground during an operation to drive away wild elephants from human habitations. That elephant had at first tried to crush him with its foreleg. However, at the very last moment, the elephant had decided to spare him and instead stomped its foot beside the RO's body. A crowd, gaping at the officer still between the elephant's legs, was sure of his death. But with a loud trumpet the elephant had walked away. From that day onwards, the RO began to regard elephants with great esteem. However, the current circumstances had forced him to participate in an operation where the goal was to kill an elephant. There had been a conflict between his mind and his heart. His mind told him that the killer elephant must be eliminated. But in the core of his heart, he knew that there was something wrong somewhere. He had not slept for the last two days. He had done his duty in ensuring that the elephant was exterminated. But after the demise of the elephant, he was upset. The gloom in his heart began to spread to his mind. The others involved in the operation were also not happy. They did not know why the elephant had behaved that way.

The staff began further investigation of the identity of the elephant. The measurement of the dead elephant's foot matched with those of the footprint collected from the spots where the elephants had killed the people. To the surprise of everyone, it was a female at its prime. It was nearly 25-30 years old. There were no external marks of injury. The breasts were swollen to the size of medium sized coconuts. It was a lactating mother and its teats were wet. The herd was moving without a baby. It must have lost its calf. Further screening was done for the calf on both the sides of the Mechi River. But nothing could be found. This elephant had always moved in a herd. The other members of the herd did not resort to violence. They probably did not support the actions of this elephant but instead tried to pacify it. When this elephant was attacking its victims, not far away, they were keeping a close watch while foraging on the ripe maize crops.

The staff began to examine the dead body of the elephant. Accumulating flies on the mouth of the elephant attracted the attention of the staff. They probed the matter by inserting a stick in its jaws. A small

piece of bony flesh, approximately fifty grams in weight came out of the space close to its outer gums.

A team of veterinary surgeons was called. Since this was an unprecedented case, it was difficult to come to a conclusion as to why a female elephant had gone on a killing spree. They suspected it to be a case of rabies. The rabies virus affects the nervous system. Exposed nerves of the dead animal during the opening of the stomach could be highly infectious. Even a nick in the body of people conducting surgical incisions on the elephant could make them extremely susceptible to infection. Consequently, they jointly decided not to cut open the stomach as it could cause infection of serious proportions. They decided to take blood samples and the samples of brain tissues for investigation. The carcass was disposed off by burning.

The Range Officer begged that the elephant be given an honourable funeral. The suggestion was immediately accepted. A *Samādhi* was created, at the spot it was killed, in the memory of the elephant. This might not have healed the wounds of the Range Officer but the action alleviated his pain somewhat. His eyes were still wet when he turned back to return.

Epilogue

The killer elephant of Bamanpokhri was a rogue elephant for the people of Tukra basti and other areas where the elephant had spread its terror for a couple of days. It was given a death sentence for the crime it committed. But what about those who provoked the elephant into committing the crime?

The origin of the case of the killer elephant of Bamanpokhri could be traced to somewhere else. On June 22 of the year 2002, an elephant herd was crossing Mechi River along the river at India-Nepal border. A truck and a tractor were collecting boulders there. Seeing the herd, the driver of the truck began to honk to scare them away. The labours began to shout. The frightened herd scrambled away from the scene, passing by a raised bank where some people were loitering. The sound of the horn drew their attention towards the herd passing just below. Due to the disturbance, the herd had scattered.

Most of the elephants had already reached a safe place away from the disturbance. Only a few elephants along with a baby were still stuck below the ridge. The people standing there began to throw stones and boulders on the herd. To save themselves, the animals tried to run as fast as possible. But the elephant calf got stuck in the boulders. It could not find a way out. The crowd began to hurl stones to kill the calf. The pandemonium attracted more people who joined in throwing stones and in shouting loudly. To frighten the elephants, the truck began to honk again. In the rain of stones, the baby ran from one point to another, sometime getting entangled and stumbling among the river boulders. It kept searching for a path to reach its mother. In its nervousness, it could not make a getaway.

The mother was helplessly watching the incident, hoping its baby would make an escape. Intermittently, a cry would emerge from the baby. The crowd would burst into laughter with every cry. The pain of the baby had become a source of entertainment for the people. The mother was trumpeting in response to the baby's cries. The other elephants also joined in the trumpeting. The tone of the trumpet was not aggressive. The beasts, in the most human way they could, were begging for mercy from humans against their beastly activity. But the crowd just jeered at them. The area began to reverberate with the sound of agonized trumpeting. It was not that there was no sane person in the group. They were approaching the people to withdraw. But their individual efforts got suppressed in the loudness of the noise. The children and teenagers were the most violent.

In the heat of the moment, all the people in the crowd were energetically busy inflicting cruelty on the elephants. The baby could not avoid the darting stones. Small stones inflicted pain but did not injure the baby. But then someone in the crowd fired from a gun. The baby could not dodge the bullet. It jerked and then tumbled to the ground with a wail. The cry pierced the heart of the mother. She trumpeted loudly. The other elephants also joined the bellow. The baby somehow managed to get up. But then a boulder hit it. It was too much for the calf. It fell to the ground

and could not get up. The mother, on the other hand, was unable to bear the insuperable pain of its offspring. Without bothering about the pelting stones, she dashed forward. By this time, the baby had been critically injured. The mob was cheering amidst its wails. Seeing the calf collapse, they were jumping in elation.

Unmindful of the projecting missile-like stones, the helpless mother kept rushing towards its baby. The crowd now directed their stones at the mother. She did not mind the missiles of small stones. But then some threw big boulders. A large boulder smashed on her shoulder. The instantaneous physical pain overcame the mental pain of seeing her calf in pain. Yet she recovered and moved towards the baby. But then another boulder hit her. This was followed by a rain of boulders. It had no option but to retreat. After retreating a few steps, the weeping heart of a mother took over and it made another attempt to come forward. The baby had been injured very badly. Its wail then turned into groans. The mother kept moving forward and backward like a pendulum. It was unable to decide what to do. But this touching scene did not touch the heart of the people there.

In the meantime, a jeep arrived near the congregation. The people procured diesel from the jeep and made *mashāls*. They then shot the burning *mashāls* at the baby. The baby could no more tolerate this torture. It gave a loud cry and eventually died. The people were shouting, laughing and whistling. The mother finally gave in and accepted the punishment for having committed no crime. With a heavy heart, she deserted the baby and left the spot.

All this happened in the birthplace of Lord Buddha, who always fought against torture to the animals. It happened in a place where the inhabitants worship the elephant as Lord Ganesh. These ignorant people had tortured and killed their God.

The government records show that the mother was a killer elephant. There is no mention that in this cruel world, a mob in the so-called civilized society, had brutally murdered an innocent baby in the most beastly manner and converted a peace-loving mother into a revengeful animal, giving her the epithet of the 'killer beast'.