

BOSE, Shibani. *Mega mammals in ancient India: rhinos, tigers and elephants*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi: 2020. xix, 361 pp.; 53 figures. Price: £44.99. ISBN 9780190120412 (hardback), 9780199099870 (e-book).

The elephant is an iconic animal which has had an inseparable bond with humans from almost time immemorial. Early people must have overcome their natural fear for such an awesome animal which then became a good companion in battle as well as in daily life. The tiger's association with men was one of fear for this fierce predator would stalk livestock as well as people when given a chance. The rhinoceros was best left alone as there was little to gain from attempting to subdue such a formidable opponent which resisted domestication.

These are the three species selected by Shibani Bose as the prominent "mega mammals" in the Indian landscape. Chronologically her enquiry ends in medieval times (to 1200 CE). Geographically her limits coincide with a traditional interpretation of the subcontinent to include present-day Pakistan, and eastern and northern India. Shibani Bose is a historian educated both in India and the USA. This book stands firmly in Indian scholarship and transcends to a more international perspective. For each of the three species, Bose lists and explains the available evidence of faunal remains, visual depictions and textual references in the corpus of Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit accounts.

The evidence for the rhinoceros is uneven, that for the tiger is inexplicably scant, that for the elephant both overwhelming and occasionally patchy. Bose provides maps of the occurrences of these three species at the end of the book (pp. 303–305) showing the localities mentioned in the text, divided for the Mesolithic, Harappan and Chalcolithic periods. These maps are an important visual aid, especially for western readers who may not be too familiar with the plethora of Indian towns, districts and states. The rhinoceros was attested in many localities across the region, which shows that this species must have had a much wider range in ancient India than today. It was still reported in northern Pakistan in the Mughal period, but its disappearance from the Indus valley, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Haryana probably dates from an earlier period.

Tigers were common in parts of the study area, but have left few traces, maybe because their bones are too fragile to be preserved. The large cat has been reported from Mesolithic sites in northern Pakistan, beyond its generally recognized former distribution. Although it was depicted on many seals in Mohenjo-Daro, unmistakably showing the striped skin pattern, its presence there is absent from the map, although interesting as being on the western edge of the tiger's existence. The elephant was, of course, a prominent part of Indian culture from early days. Wild elephants have a much restricted range today compared to earlier era, when remains were found as far west as Gujarat and Pakistan. It is also regularly mentioned in the ancient texts in a wide variety of guises.

Much of the strength of this book is that the author has been able to access and summarize the scholarly works of India which for a western researcher are often hard to find. When using these sources as she does, we remain confronted by a variety of interpretations of the chronology of the different eras and cultures, all reported according to the understanding of the original authors. Archaeological and palaeontological theories are in a constant state of flux and much still needs to be learned. Her use of scientific names of animals also remains stuck in her sources, for instance using *Rhinoceros indicus* without indicating that it is no more than a synonym of *Rhinoceros unicornis*.

There is much to like in this book. The sections on the ancient texts open up a complicated field of study. The treatment of the archaeological sources is accurate and comprehensive. The bibliography spans 38 pages with some 450 references. The book is well written and carefully researched. It will stand as a monument to these extraordinary mammals in historical India.