

Book Review

“The Story of Asia’s Elephants” by Raman Sukumar

Reviewed by Dhanesh Wisumperuma

Elephants have played an important part in the history of humankind, wherever these two fascinating species have interacted with each other. The Elephant is the largest mammal on land and the human being is considered the *de facto* ruler of the land – hence their paths are destined to meet. Animals were part of the socio-economic-cultural system of many countries, a factor especially important in the case of the Asian elephant, as it was associated with the man for centuries. Aspects of human-elephant relationships have been widely discussed throughout time, with a large number of publications originating from countries where the species is found.

The recent publication of Professor Raman Sukumar is an exception to the generally discussed aspects – it is the Story of Asia’s elephants through history, cultures and societies. The evolution of human-elephant relationships is presented in the best possible form supported by ample evidence. The story is presented as a narrative running through ten descriptive chapters lined up according to historical order and illustrated with photographs and maps.

Sketch of the contents

The first chapter is an exploration of the origin of human-elephant relationships. This includes the evolution of elephants as well as the humans and their association during the prehistoric period to the dawn of civilization. This was an important point of the human-elephant relationship, as the animal was tamed during these times. With the use of artifacts symbolizing elephants found from the Harappan civilization, Sukumar concludes that the elephant was tamed at least 4600 years ago, i.e. around 2600 BCE.

The next chapter is an analysis of the depictions of elephants found in Vedic and epic literature, one of the most ancient forms in the region. The author makes an effort to compare the elephant related artifacts that are contemporary to these literary sources, thus strengthening the human-elephant relationships and establishing its historic context.

Chapter three is devoted to a different role of the elephants – the elephant armies that became important with the emergence of large empires, like the Magadhan Kingdom around 6th century BCE. Wars were where elephants were mainly used during human history, wherever the elephant was found. With its huge size and capacity, the elephant was an admirable war machine, a role they played until the 18th-19th century in Asia. The next chapter is on another aspect of elephants and related to the preceding chapter - the introduction of the Asian elephant to the western world. The narrative records such incidents from 1st millennium BCE to the 16th century.

The religious connection or the association of elephants is described in the next three chapters. Sukumar uses Buddhist, Jain and Hindu descriptions. Religious literature as well as art and artifacts are used in this section to construct the narrative. The religious significance depicts the height of the human-elephant relationships, as the religious connection still prevails in present day society. The chapter on the Islamic Period is more on the historical period of India, rather than the religious influence.

A reader will realize that the western colonial period, beginning from the 16th century, is the most crucial period for many Asian nations since it resulted in the huge exploitation of all

types of resources. This fate was common to the elephant. The human-elephant relationship changed drastically during this period as a result of actions such as capture and slaughter for sport. Although the animal was always considered an economic resource, it was during this period that the elephant was hugely exploited for trade. The eighth chapter of the book is on the elephant during colonial Asia.

The author describes the position of elephants in post-colonial or independent nations in the next chapter. This is generally the time from the second half of the 20th century, during which rapid development and population expansion in these countries, made the animal vulnerable. The book's last chapter is an analysis of the ecology and conservation of Asia's elephants – an area where the author's expertise lies. An analysis of present research on the elephant is found in this section including an outline of measures required to ensure the survival of the species.

General remarks

Geographically, the book focuses mainly on India, for the obvious reason owing to the greater significance of the elephant in that ancient Asian civilization. However, he has included the best illustrative examples as evidence from the enormous resource base on elephants derived from all Asian countries, which lie in the present range of the animal.

As Sukumar mentions, the book is not an art history, but an ecological and cultural history of the animal. The historical context is presented with a high degree of accuracy, based on established sources available at present. He narrates all background material related to the history in concern, thus providing a better understanding for a reader who is not well versed in the history of South Asia and other regions depicted in the book.

The language, the style of writing and the layout of the Story of the Asia's Elephants make it an easy read. The book which runs into over 300 pages

contain over 200, mostly color photographs, which complement the author's arguments.

The richly illustrated book provides anyone interested with the essentials of the human-elephant relationships. This is important at a time where this relationship as well as the existence of elephants itself are threatened by changes that took place during the last century. The relationship between elephant and man has deteriorated with these changes, and is facing new challenges. The book not only provides the historical narrative, but also fresh ideas for the conservation of elephants by encouraging the use of elements in cultural history in today's conservation efforts.

Raman Sukumar is the Professor and Chair of the Centre for Ecological Sciences, Bangalore. His studies on elephants have addressed many aspects including its cultural history. His researches on elephants, as well as other subjects, are recognized internationally.

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