

HATI BONDHU, ASSAM (FRIENDS OF ELEPHANTS)

HATI BONDHU ACTIVITIES : A HOLISTIC APPROACH

Hati Bondhu fraternity of Assam is actively working on some burning issues of the wild elephants of Assam,- like effect of habitat shrinkages and degradation, corridor encroachments, food scarcity, etc and subsequent human- elephant conflicts,- **and a way forward in love and compassion towards the elephants.**

I- A Background Note-

Assam has an elephant population of 5719 elephants as per data published by MoEFCC in 2017. In contrast to the mere 5719 elephants, we have over 4 crore of residents (not population) in Assam. This immense gap of people and elephants, puts human elephant conflicts in perspective,- **death of one elephant pushes towards ultimate disappearance of this Elephant Maximus from this region.**

i- Loss of Habitat-

As per Gajah Report by the Task Force of MoEFCC as published in 31-08-2010, the elephant habitats of the Northern bank of Assam are under severe biotic pressure resulting in degradation and fragmentation of forests. Between 1991 and 1998 **more than 1500 square kilometer of forest area** has come under **human encroachment** in this Northern Landscape. In Karbi Hills in Central Assam, the forests are being systematically denuded and the Karbi Anglong Autonomus Council is issuing land pattas indiscriminately in RF's. Same is the story of degradation and fragmentation of other forest areas of Assam.

Also, most of the Elephant Corridors are either encroached or has severe human activities within them. Elephants have to survive now within fragmented habitat areas.

ii- Loss of Biodiversity inside Elephant Habitats-

Not only the Elephant Habitats are shrunken, the biodiversity of the habitats are also lost due to human destruction. Today the quality of the

forests, except NP's and PA's, are deplorable. In Karbi Anglong elephants, basically survive by eating Kako Bamboos only.

iii- Human-Elephant Conflicts-

Major Human-Elephant conflicts take place in Nov-Dec during the period of ripening of the paddy. Adult elephants, need 200 kg of food and adequate water daily, but with loss of habitats, shrunken biodiversity and blockages of many corridors, it is but inevitable that human elephant conflicts to accelerate as elephants come out in search of food.

II- Hati Bondu's Approach to mitigate elephant's precarious survival-

i- Food Security-

In the context of shrunken and degraded habitats, Hati Bondhu has realized that **elephants need "food security"** year-long most urgently. This can be achieved by –

a- planting grasses like Napier, Groom Grass and Kako Bamboos, etc in barren habitat areas. Planted in April-May Napiers will be ready for eating by elephants by Aug-Sept,- Broom grasses by Oct-Nov. While eating these grasses elephant eat from halfway or so and in no time the grasses grow back giving a perpetual food source which is also loved by elephants.

Also trees like Kothal, Outenga, Samkothal, Bot, other varieties of ficus trees need to be planted as a long term measure as food sources and shade. Birds will ultimately propagate these trees far and wide.

b- Planting of Rice-

Most human-elephant conflicts occur in the month of Nov-Dec at the time of ripening of paddy. Elephant herds come down to the paddy fields for eating the paddy which they love and the villagers fight tooth and nail to save their crop. Elephants and humans are killed, injured in large numbers every year. Some unscrupulous farmers put live electric lines in the boundary of their paddy fields and many elephants die due to electrocution.

Considering the fact that the lure to eat rice in Nov-Dec is the main cause of human-elephant conflicts, the Hati Bondhu decided to plant rice in strategic locations for elephants in a bid to keep them away from farmers' fields and thus avoid conflicts.

c- Hati Bondhu is aware of the maltreatment of many retired elephants and has the intention to setup a Elephant Rehabilitation Center, sooner than later.

III- Our Basic Philosophy-

The above are the core activities of the Hati Bondhu along with community involvement.

In a nutshell, our basic approach is to improve the elephant habitats by-

- a- ensuring food security by improving the elephant habitats.
- b- by planting rice in strategic areas for elephants to reduce man-elephant conflicts.
- c- to change the mindset of the people from total intolerance to tolerance, acceptance and love towards elephants.
- d- to conduct awareness programs especially among school children towards elephants and nature alongwith other **allied activities.**

IV- The amazing factor- Elephant reciprocacy to acts of love and kindness by humans-

All these activities are being undertaken by Hati Bondhu **in love for elephants** with active participation of communities. The elephants are called Sarabjans in our folklore,- one who knows everything and **we have found they actually know** what we are doing in love for them as can be seen from their reactions.

The elephants reciprocated our planting of rice for them in 2019 and 2020 in many amazing ways. Since planting of rice for them, **the villagers didn't face elephant depredation of the Boro Rice planted for their own use.** The villagers harvested one hundred percent of their rice and only after that the herds entered the fields to eat the straws left after harvesting!

In all previous years, there used to be great conflicts between elephant herds and villagers during ripening of the boro paddy, - many elephants

and humans died, - many more were injured. Also, the villagers could barely harvest even 50 percent of the crop. Elephant herds used to enter villages and destroy houses, gardens, granaries, etc. but since planting of napier, rice, etc for them the elephant herds **have not entered the villages in a mood of destruction and confrontation.**

These remarkable changes are witnessed by Ronghong, Pulibagan, Balijuri, Jiajuri villages in the fringe of the elephant country of Karbi Hills.

V- Humans need to Change-

In today's scenario, the humans treat elephants as enemies and the elephants treat humans as enemies in return. In this context we need to realize that, it is **we, the humans, have encroached and degraded their habitats, corridors etc depleted their food sources,** and for the human elephant conflicts to mitigate now, we humans have to change our attitude towards elephants. **We must love elephants unconditionally and show our intent with acts of love for them. THIS IS THE UNDERLINING PHILOSOPHY OF HATI BONDHU'S ACTIONS AND ACTIVITIES.** From our experience, we can say with confidence that, if we show some genuine acts of love for the elephants, they will reciprocate in amazing ways, paving the way for **a change of attitude of the whole community** towards elephants in a short span of time,- from anger towards elephants to acceptance and finally to love. The villagers of Rong Hong, Pulibagan, Balijuri will vouch for such a dramatic change in their attitude towards elephants now. The Hati Bondhu strongly believes from experience that **love is the essence for a true resolution of the human-elephant conflicts.**

Pradip Bhuyan
Octogenarian Hati Bondhu