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Writing Elephants into the History of Colonial Assam: A Historiographical Review

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ABSTRACT

Elephants have occupied an important position in the environmental, political, economic, and cultural history of South Asia. In colonial Assam, they were not merely a significant component of the region's ecology but also played crucial roles in forestry, transportation, labour, hunting, frontier administration, and state governance. Their importance extended beyond their practical utility, reflecting the complex relationship between colonial authority, natural resources, and local societies. Despite the growing scholarship on environmental history, animal history, and colonial governance, elephants have often remained marginal within broader historical narratives. This article reviews the major historiographical trends relating to elephants in colonial Assam by examining scholarship on environmental history, wildlife governance, elephant capture, human–elephant conflict, frontier administration, and cultural representations. Drawing upon the works of scholars such as Ramachandra Guha, David Arnold, Mahesh Rangarajan, Thomas R. Trautmann, Arupjyoti Saikia, Jayeeta Sharma, and others, it traces how existing scholarship has approached the relationship between colonial expansion, environmental transformation, and the management of animal resources. It also considers the contributions and limitations of studies on elephant hunting, conservation, and human–elephant relations in understanding the colonial experience of Assam. The article argues that, although significant advances have been made in explaining colonial environmental transformations and wildlife governance, elephants have rarely been examined as central subjects within the structures and practices of colonial administration. By bringing these strands of scholarship together, this review identifies important historiographical gaps and highlights the need for a more integrated historical understanding of elephants in colonial Assam.

Keywords: Elephants, Colonial Assam, Environmental History, Wildlife Governance, Historiography

1 Introduction

During the British period, elephants were not only part of the ecological landscape, but were also deeply embedded within administrative, economic, and political structures. Elephants were not peripheral to colonial Assam. They were simultaneously a revenue-bearing "forest product," a labouring and transport animal essential to military, telegraph, timber, and plantation infrastructures, and a legal object through which the colonial state elaborated sovereignty over forests and frontier space. Official Assamese administrative reports in the 1870s explicitly described elephants as one of the most important products of the province's forests; they also documented the state's claim to license capture, exercise pre-emption over fit animals, collect royalties, and convert elephant mahals into a stream of miscellaneous land revenue. At the same time, planter memoirs, sporting literature, missionary recollections, and gazetteers reveal elephants as companions, carriers, dangers, and symbols embedded in everyday colonial mobility and knowledge production. This paper argues that the history of elephants in colonial Assam is best understood at the intersection of state formation, extractive political economy, and human-animal relations. (Government of Assam, 1877)

The historiography has moved through three broad phases. The first consisted of natural-historical, administrative, and sporting description: capture techniques, elephant types, hunting grounds, and revenue rules. The second treated elephants as a strategic resource within regional political economy and colonial governance, especially in work on state monopoly, licensing, contestation, and "control." The third, and a more recent phase places elephants within environmental history and human-animal studies, emphasizing forests as a reordered space, wildlife policy as utilitarian conservation, and non-humans as constitutive of empire rather than merely its background. Even so, the field remains uneven. Capture, preservation law, and colonial management are substantially better studied than mahout labour, elephant disease and mortality, vernacular classifications, indigenous sovereignty claims, and the long infrastructural careers of working elephants in the tea-forest frontier. (Nongbri, 2003)

Objectives

1. To review the existing historiography on elephants in colonial Assam within the broader fields of environmental history and animal history.
2. To examine how scholars have interpreted the relationship between elephants, colonial governance, wildlife management, and environmental change.
3. To assess the potential of elephants as a subject of historical inquiry in understanding the environmental and political history of colonial Assam.

1. Methodology

This study adopts a historical and historiographical approach to examine the position of elephants within the environmental, political, and administrative history of colonial Assam. It is primarily based on a critical review of secondary literature, including books, journal articles, and scholarly works relating to environmental history, animal history, colonial governance, wildlife management, and the history of Assam and Northeast India. The article also considers colonial-era administrative reports, statistical accounts, and natural-historical writings as they are discussed in existing scholarship. These materials provide an important context for understanding colonial perceptions of elephants, particularly in relation to capture practices, administrative regulation, revenue generation, and the use of specialised labour.

Rather than offering an exhaustive reconstruction of colonial elephant management, the article critically examines how existing historical scholarship has approached the relationship between elephants, colonial authority, environmental transformation, and local societies. It identifies the contributions and limitations of this literature and highlights areas requiring further historical investigation. The geographical focus remains on colonial Assam, broadly covering the period from 1826 to 1947, while drawing upon scholarship from other parts of colonial India and world, where comparative perspectives are relevant.

2. Historiographical Review

The earliest layer of writing on elephants in Assam was descriptive rather than analytical. Archibald Campbell's (1869) paper on capture methods, Hunter's (1879) district accounts, the Assam administration reports, gazetteers, planter memoirs, and sporting narratives all catalogued techniques, terrains, classifications, and legal practices. Their value is immense: Campbell (1869) described labour specializations such as *kheda walas*, *phanaits*, and *koonki* elephants, while also providing details of the organisation of elephant-catching operations. Hunter's (1879) *Statistical Account of Assam* offers a particularly useful administrative perspective. His district accounts record the division of elephant-catching areas into mahals, the auctioning of capture rights, the payment of royalties, and the government's claims over captured elephants. Barker's (1884) *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam*, in contrast, provides a planter's perspective on the place of elephants within plantation life. His observations refer to elephants being regularly required for garden service, leaving little opportunity for their use in hunting, and also describe the risks and difficulties associated with their presence in the plantation landscape. Pollok and Thom's (1900) *Wild Sports of Burma and Assam* similarly preserve the sporting perspective of European observers. Their descriptions of elephant-backed expeditions, the use of mahouts, and the practical difficulties of

travelling and hunting in forested terrain offer insights into the role of elephants in colonial mobility and sport. However, these accounts need to be read critically, as they largely reflect the interests and perceptions of colonial officials, planters, and sportsmen. Taken together, these writings are valuable for reconstructing the administrative, economic, and practical dimensions of elephant use, even as they tend to represent elephants primarily as resources to be captured, managed, employed, or hunted.

A second historiographical phase shifted attention from description to governance. The key turn here is Nongbri's (2003) argument that late nineteenth-century elephant hunting in northeastern India should be read through "mechanisms of control, contestation and local reactions," that is, as a field of interaction between state monopoly and social actors rather than as a merely technical matter of wildlife capture. Singh's (2020) later work sharpened this perspective by centering colonial Assam directly: her account treats elephant hunting and capture as a monopolized domain of the British government, examines the relative importance of kheddah and private lease systems, and links elephant preservation to the early history of wildlife policy in India. These works remain foundational because they make elephants visible as a strategic natural resource and as a site where colonial sovereignty had to be constantly produced, negotiated, and defended.

A third phase, shaped by environmental history and human-animal studies, has opened a broader interpretive horizon. Saikia's (2011) forest history of Assam reframes elephant history implicitly by explaining how colonial forest reservation re-ordered space, consolidated monopoly over resources, and eventually moved from game to wildlife conservation. Sharma's (2011) work on tea, migration, and the making of Assam is equally important because it situates elephants within the commodity frontier and visual economy of the tea province. Trautmann's (2015) long durée environmental history of elephants and kings offers a deeper genealogy for South Asian elephant-state relations.

The practical organisation of elephant capture also depended upon the specialised labour and knowledge of local workers. Campbell's (1869) account provides useful details of these occupational roles. The *kheddah* was a method of capturing wild elephants by driving or guiding them into an enclosed stockade, while a *mahal* referred to a designated area or tract whose elephant-catching rights could be leased. The *koonki* was a trained domestic elephant used in the capture of wild elephants, and the *phanait* was a specialised catcher responsible for noosing them. These roles indicate that elephant capture was not simply an administrative activity directed by colonial authorities; it relied upon workers with specialised knowledge of elephant behaviour, forest terrain, tracking, handling, and capture techniques. Campbell's account also records the risks involved in these operations and the

wages received by some of the workers. Such descriptions reveal the dependence of colonial elephant management upon local expertise and organised labour, even as the authority to regulate and derive revenue from capture increasingly rested with the colonial state.

Still, the existing historiography is marked by asymmetry. We know considerably more about the colonial government's proprietary claims than about the social worlds of mahouts, catchers, rope makers, forest villagers, women within elephant camps, or the caste and ethnic organization of elephant work. We also know more about elite English-language representations than about Assamese, Bengali, Khasi, or frontier-language archives that might reveal different moral and political meanings of elephants. The next stage of research therefore needs to move from "elephant policy" toward "elephant worlds".

3. Thematic analysis

I. Human–Animal Relations and Animal History

This section establishes the conceptual and historiographical framework for analysing elephants not merely as ecological entities but as historically embedded actors shaped by imperial governance, labour systems, and cultural representation. The study draws upon animal history scholarship to move beyond anthropocentric narratives and situate human–elephant relations within broader structures of power, economy, and environmental control.

Fudge's (2002) work *Animal*, provides an important theoretical starting point by challenging historians to treat animals as historical subjects rather than passive background elements. Fudge argues that animals were historically embedded within systems of domination, labour, and representation constructed by human societies. Her approach is useful for analysing colonial Assam, where elephants functioned simultaneously as state property, administrative tools, and symbols of imperial authority. Similarly, Ritvo's (1987) *The Animal Estate* demonstrates how animals in Victorian Britain were deeply embedded within social hierarchy, imperial ideology, and cultural symbolism. Ritvo shows that animals operated as markers of class power and imperial dominance, offering a comparative framework for understanding colonial Assam's use of elephants in military expeditions, administrative travel, and imperial spectacle.

Ecological studies also contribute historical depth to human–animal relations. Sukumar's (2003) *The Living Elephants*, though primarily scientific, traces long-term patterns of domestication, hunting, and economic exploitation, highlighting continuities between precolonial and colonial elephant use. Likewise, Desai's (2002) *The Indian Elephant* demonstrates how elephants transitioned from valued labour and transport animals to subjects of modern regulation and conservation. Environmental history scholarship further contextualises human–animal relations within imperial governance. Arnold's (1996) *The*

Problem of Nature highlights how colonial anxieties about nature shaped policies toward wildlife, framing animals as threats requiring control and intervention. This perspective helps explain colonial narratives surrounding dangerous animals and legitimised state violence against wildlife. Meanwhile, Rangarajan's (2001) *India's Wildlife History* traces shifting attitudes from imperial hunting cultures to modern conservation regimes, demonstrating how animals were redefined within changing political and scientific frameworks. Together, these works highlight the importance of integrating ecological knowledge with historical analysis while also revealing a broader historiographical gap: the relative absence of region-specific animal histories focused on elephants within colonial Assam's administrative and political landscape.

II. Colonial Environmental Governance and State Control

Scholarship on colonial environmental governance provides the analytical framework for understanding how imperial authority transformed landscapes, wildlife management, and administrative control mechanisms in colonial India. Rather than viewing environmental policies as isolated interventions, this body of literature situates them within broader projects of colonial statemaking, resource extraction, and bureaucratic expansion.

Arnold's (1996) *The Problem of Nature* offers a foundational conceptual framework by demonstrating how European perceptions of tropical environments as excessive and dangerous justified scientific classification, surveillance, and intervention. His arguments allow elephant capture regulations, hunting laws, and wildlife policies to be interpreted as components of a wider imperial project of environmental control.

Environmental history scholarship further situates colonial governance within institutional frameworks of forestry and conservation. Guha's (1989) *The Unquiet Woods* demonstrates how scientific forestry converted forests into commercial resources governed through bureaucratic regulation, restricting customary access and restructuring ecological practices. Although regionally focused on the Himalayas, Guha's work provides a comparative lens for analysing similar processes in Assam's forest and wildlife management systems. Complementing this perspective, Rangarajan's (2001) *India's Wildlife History* traces the evolution of wildlife governance from imperial hunting culture to conservation legislation, illustrating how administrative priorities shaped state intervention in animal populations. Rangarajan's (1996) '*Fencing the Forest'* further analyses how forest reservation policies institutionalised ecological control through bureaucratic expansion, providing an important comparative framework for understanding colonial wildlife regulation.

Colonial statemaking and environmental governance are further analysed in

Sivaramakrishnan's (1999) *Modern Forests*, which demonstrates how scientific forestry, ecological classification, and administrative regulation became central tools of governance in Eastern India. Sivaramakrishnan's (1999) article 'Colonialism and Forestry in India' similarly shows how forest reservation, legal categorisation, and mapping practices transformed landscapes into governed territories, restructuring relationships between communities, wildlife, and resources. Together, these works emphasise the institutional mechanisms through which colonial authorities extended control over both nature and society. Broader imperial environmental thought is explored in Grove's (1995) *Green Imperialism*, which argues that conservation policies emerged from imperial scientific networks concerned with ecological degradation in tropical colonies.

Environmental governance scholarship in the Indian context also foregrounds the relationship between ecology and social classification. Guha's (1999) *Environment and Ethnicity in India* demonstrates how colonial administration linked ecological zones with ethnic categorisation, reshaping land use and resource access. This perspective is crucial for analysing wildlife regulation and elephant governance as intertwined with social control. Regionally grounded environmental history is further developed in Saikia's (2011) *Forests and Ecological History of Assam*, which shows how forest administration in Assam functioned as a mechanism of colonial governance through regulatory frameworks governing land use, labour, and wildlife.

Knowledge production and imperial classification are also central themes in Sharma's (2011) *Empire's Garden*, which analyses how colonial knowledge systems organised land and resources to facilitate administrative control. Collectively, this scholarship demonstrates that colonial environmental governance operated through intertwined processes of scientific classification, bureaucratic expansion, ecological transformation, and knowledge production. However, while these works provide strong theoretical and regional foundations, they rarely offer sustained analysis of elephant governance in Assam as a nexus linking environmental regulation, labour organisation, and imperial administration.

III. Elephant Ecology, Human- Elephant conflict, and Management under Colonial Rule

Scholarship on elephant ecology, environmental transformation, and wildlife governance provides the analytical context for understanding colonial elephant management not merely as administrative policy but as a response to ecological change, agricultural expansion, and shifting human–animal interactions. Sukumar's (2003) *The Living Elephants* provides a foundational ecological framework by analysing habitat requirements, migration routes, feeding patterns, and herd behaviour. Sukumar (2003) demonstrates how seasonal movement and crop-raiding

behaviour emerge from landscape change, offering an important lens for interpreting colonial classifications of "rogue" elephants and administrative interventions aimed at controlling agricultural damage. Similarly, Desai's (2002) *The Indian Elephant* situates human–elephant conflict within processes of habitat fragmentation and agricultural expansion. Desai's analysis of migration patterns, landscape pressures, and conflict mitigation strategies provides a comparative ecological framework for understanding why colonial authorities developed systematic capture operations, hunting regulations, and compensation mechanisms.

Environmental history scholarship further contextualises conflict through broader processes of colonial ecological transformation. Guha's (1989) *The Unquiet Woods* demonstrates how scientific forestry and commercial exploitation reshaped forest ecosystems and disrupted established relationships between communities, wildlife, and landscapes. Wildlife governance scholarship extends this analysis by examining institutional responses to large mammal management. Rangarajan's (2001) *India's Wildlife History* highlights how wildlife policies developed partly in response to rural conflict and agricultural pressures, while *Fencing the Forest* (Rangarajan, 1996) demonstrates how legal restrictions and bureaucratic oversight structured animal management within colonial forest regimes.

Colonial environmental governance literature further clarifies how bureaucratic structures shaped wildlife regulation. Sivaramakrishnan's (1999) *Modern Forests* emphasises scientific classification and administrative oversight as tools of ecological control, helping situate elephant preservation laws and capture regulations within wider colonial governance mechanisms. Similarly, Grove's (1995) book *Green Imperialism* shows how conservation policies functioned as instruments of imperial administration, linking environmental regulation with state authority and resource management.

Broader social-ecological scholarship highlights the structural drivers of human–elephant conflict. Guha's (1999) *Environment and Ethnicity in India* shows how demographic change and agricultural expansion intensified competition over land and resources, while Saikia's (2011) *Forests and Ecological History of Assam* demonstrates how colonial forest reorganisation reshaped ecological systems and frontier economies in Assam. Sharma's (2011) *Empire's Garden* 'further situates conflict within plantation expansion, labour migration, and landscape restructuring, showing how frontier mobility altered elephant habitats and intensified administrative intervention in wildlife management. Taken together, this scholarship demonstrates that human–elephant conflict and wildlife management emerged from interconnected processes of ecological transformation, administrative expansion, and frontier settlements.

IV. Environmental and Frontier Histories of Assam and Northeast India

Scholarship on frontier environments and regional histories of Northeast India provides the broader spatial and political context within which colonial elephant governance developed. These works collectively demonstrate that Assam functioned not merely as a peripheral territory but as a dynamic frontier shaped by ecological transformation, plantation capitalism, differentiated administrative structures, and imperial territorial expansion.

Comparative environmental history offers important conceptual tools for analysing frontier administration. Rangarajan's (1996) *Fencing the Forest*, although focused on the Central Provinces, analyses territorial expansion, forest reservation, and environmental regulation as instruments of imperial control over forested landscapes. Similarly, Sivaramakrishnan's (1999) *Modern Forests* emphasises environmental territorialisation, negotiation with local communities, and administrative expansion in Eastern India, offering valuable comparative insights into how colonial states governed frontier ecologies.

Conceptual perspectives on imperial environmental expansion further illuminate frontier governance. Grove's (1995) *Green Imperialism* demonstrates how colonial expansion into tropical environments produced new forms of ecological regulation and administrative intervention. Guha's (1999) *Environment and Ethnicity in India* adds a political–geographical dimension by analysing how colonial administrators incorporated forest and hill communities into differentiated systems of governance, shaping conflicts over land access, hunting rights, and wildlife regulation in frontier zones.

Regional environmental histories provide more direct context for Assam. Saikia's (2011) *Forests and Ecological History of Assam* demonstrates how imperial forestry, plantation expansion, and frontier administration transformed landscapes and restructured relationships between communities and forest resources. Sharma's (2011) *Empire's Garden* further highlights how plantation economies, labour migration, and frontier settlement reshaped ecological systems and intensified administrative intervention in wildlife and land governance. Political and economic histories of Assam expand this frontier perspective. Baruah's (1999) *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* and *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* (Baruah, 2005) examine frontier governance and differentiated administrative structures, highlighting how exceptional political systems shaped land regulation, forest management, and wildlife policies in peripheral regions such as the Garo Hills, Cachar, and the Eastern Duars.

Regional environmental historiography has increasingly foregrounded the political

dimensions of ecological change. Nag's (2017) edited volume *Playing with Nature: History and Politics of Environment in North East India* brings together case studies demonstrating how colonial forestry, plantation expansion, and wildlife governance reconfigured relationships between indigenous communities and natural resources, highlighting the distinct ecological politics of Northeast India. Barua's (2024) work *Plantation Worlds* analyses how plantation capitalism reshaped forests, labour regimes, and wildlife landscapes, situating elephants as actors within political–economic and environmental transformations. Collectively, this scholarship demonstrates that colonial Assam must be understood as a politically differentiated ecological frontier shaped by plantation economies, imperial governance, and environmental transformation.

4. Conclusion

The historiography of elephants in colonial Assam has advanced substantially, but it still contains a productive tension between what the colonial archive most readily preserves and what historians now most want to know. The archive is strongest on licensing, revenue, legal monopoly, capture methods, and frontier transport. It is weaker on subaltern labour, elephant welfare, vernacular meaning, and ecological change over time. Yet this asymmetry is itself historically revealing. It shows that the colonial state valued elephants above all as useful power: detachable from the forest through capture, mobile across difficult terrain, convertible into revenue, and preservable precisely because they were profitable and strategic. Read critically and comparatively, the elephant archive opens a powerful route into the making of colonial Assam itself.

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