

An Interview with the “Queen of Elephants” Parbati Barua

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Parbati Barua is one of the greatest Defenders of Wildlife. She was first introduced in the field of elephant management by her late father, popularly known as Lalji. She was born into one of the royal families of Assam. So owning elephants in the olden days was a sign of status and a common feature among rich families. She had a very close connection with the elephants and spent most of her time in domesticating and training wild elephants and also treatment of sick and injured elephants.

She first domesticated an elephant in Kochugaon forest (Assam) at the age of 14. She independently tamed 14 wild elephants by MELA SHIKAR (1975 to 1978) in the forests of Assam (Darrang and Kochugaon) and North Bengal (Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling). She also has been assisting the West Bengal since 1980 in dealing with the elephant depredation in tea gardens in northern as well as southern part of the state. She even helped the forest officers in treatment and nursing of the newly tamed elephants. Parbati Baruah assisted Subhasini Tea Garden, a tea estate in North Bengal during 1991-1993 in tackling a serious problem of depredation by leopards using trained elephants. A similar help was provided to Fatemabad (Basbari) Tea Estate in getting rid of the tiger depredation.

She attended the International Workshop on Elephants held in Jaldapara Sanctuary (West Bengal) in 1982 and also took part in the International Seminar on Asiatic Elephants organized by Bombay Natural History Society in Mudumalai Sanctuary (Tamilnadu) in June 1993 and contributed two papers on the status of elephants of North Bengal. She represented India in the International Workshop on the Domesticated Asian Elephant at Bangkok, Thailand organized by the F.O.A. in February, 2001

She contributed so selflessly. She assisted the West Bengal Forest Department in march 2000 in organizing training for the ‘Mahouts’ and field staff working for the elephant census. She acted as the first resource person for the first Mahout training course organized by the Uttaranchal Forest Department.

She was further involved in many such activities which improved the living condition of the Elephants.

She received an immense number of awards for her contribution for the elephants both in captivity and in the wild. She got the United Nation Environment Program (UNEP) award, “Global 500 - Roll of Honour” in 1989 for welfare and management of both wild and captive elephants. She

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was felicitated by the chief minister of Assam during the 43rd Wildlife Week in October 1997 for her outstanding work on wildlife conservation. She also received felicitations from the 'Assam Silpi Divas Samity' in Guwahati and 'Sadou Assam Lekhika Samaeoha Samiy' at Goalpara on 29 January 2001. The Government of Assam felicitated her at the "Honorary Chief Elephant warden of Assam" for her lifetime work for the lifetime work for Elephants on 11 January, 2003.

She took part in many documentary and feature films like; the Bengali Feature Film on nature conservation "Aranya Amar" in 1982-83, the B.B.C documentary film "Jumbo Jumboorie" in 1987 and the Discovery Channel's "Queen of the Elephants" in 1992-93. She also featured in Doordarshan's program "A Face in the Crowd" in August 1992. She also appeared in Doordarshan's North East Folio and some other programs of Guwahati Centre of Doordarshan .

Parbati Barua contributed to many popular articles and papers on elephants in English, Bengali and Assamese. She is also a performer of the Goalparan Folk Dance. She has participated in cultural programs in various places in India.

Parbati Barua "Queen of Elephants" is the only woman elephant catcher and practitioner of Mela Shikar in Asia or probably in the world. She is also a member of the Asian Elephant Specialist Group of the I.C.U.N. and "Man- Elephant Conflict" Task Force of Government of Assam. She successfully trained the captive Man killer elephants.

Parbati Barua is really one of the greatest women to be alive. It is not just her compassion towards wildlife but also her bravery to go in such field and make a difference that makes her so special. It is a really hard and tricky job to work with wild animals, specially elephants as you cannot understand their behaviour properly. So it takes years of practice and experience to work in such a dangerous environment.

Kudos to her effort and bravery and hoping to see more individuals like her to be like her and explore the wildlife.[The following conversation took place at the residence of Shrimati Parbati Baruah on 25th of March 2016 ; Here P.B denotes Parbati Baruah]

Question 1: Good evening ma'am , now we can start our formal interview. Please tell me about your childhood and may I ask you about how you first came in contact with the elephants?

P.B. : Well, good evening to you too and first of all I welcome you whole heartedly to my residence and it is my pleasure to share something about my childhood and my family ,then you can easily pick out how I came to contact with elephants. I was born in Gauripur, Dist. Dhubri of Assam. After my birth ,I was directly taken from my grandmother's place to the place where domesticated elephants are kept when I was only a 45 days old baby by my mother Bina Barua . It is one of the most important facts of my life . Since then I have always been with elephants. I was introduced to the field of elephants by my late father Prakitish Ch. Barua. He was known as Lalji by everyone. Elephants are just like my family and they are my heart and soul. My father taught me how to tame and train wild elephants. He also taught me to treat sick and injured elephants. As I belong to one of the royal families of Assam I, with my eight brothers and sisters, was brought up in the care of many care takers. But we were taught all the household work like other common Assamese family.

Question 2: Ma'am will you like to share about your institutional education and how far did you study?

P.B. My schooling was started at the age of five in a primary school of Gauripur and up to high school level I studied in Gauripur only. I graduated from Handique Girls college of Guwahati and after that went to Guwahati University for higher education. Side by side all my sisters and I were involved in different cultural activities. I think all of you know about my elder sister 'Pratima Pandey Baruah', the legendary folk singer of Assam.

Question 3: Tell me something about your community, like your peer group, neighbours and where you have been brought up.

P.B. Our community was not so crowded like now a days and people were very simple by nature and as well their life style. They respected our family but there were no differences among our peer group. We spent some golden time in our childhood with our friends which is now a farfetched dream for children in today's generation. All the adventures and outdoor activities! After school we spent an ample amount of our time out side home by playing with friends or searching seasonal fruits in river banks or in some gardens, which was a great thrill and fun.

Question 4: Ma'am may I ask you about the cultural and other activities that you liked to associate with.

P.B.; Our family was very active in the cultural side. We participated in singing, dancing in different folk festivals. Our district Dhubri is very rich in culture. There are hundreds of folk songs and dances. I, now and then practiced and also did dance drama, called 'Palla' related to folk life or stories from great epics like "Ramayana" and "Mahabharata". We participated in and my father promoted many artists by helping economically. My elder sister Pratima Pandey Baruah is the icon of 'Gualpariya lokgeet'. We performed in different places of India also. I participated in Bengali feature film on nature conservation titled 'Aranya Amar' in 1982-83 and B.B.C documentary film 'Jumbo Jumboori' in 1987. In the years 1992-93, I performed the lead character in documentary 'Queen of elephants' produced by Discovery channel. I was also featured in a documentary by national T.V channel Duradarshan 'A face in the crowd' in August 1992. And many other programmes, some I don't remember at the moment.

Question 5: You have been associated with a lot of wildlife and animal welfare work and organisations Can you please tell something about it?

P.B.; I am the only woman elephant catcher and practitioner in Asia or probably in the world. I am also a member of the Asian Elephants Specialist Group of the I.C.U.N. I am one of the member of the "Man-Elephant conflict" task force of the Government of India and as well as Assam and successfully trained captive man killer elephants. One departmental male elephant is still with me for better training. I am also a member of International Elephant Foundation. I am always on call for any problem associated with elephants in any corner of the world. I am also a resource person for the Mahout training course, and is associated with the elephant census of South Asia.

Question 6: What is the current situation and living condition of elephants in Assam? What are the wildlife organizations in Assam doing to help and improve their situation?

P.B.; Situation is very unfair for elephants now. It is not possible to do anything in the practical field for welfare organisations without the help of community and Government . We are trying to create awareness among the people about nature and wild animals.

Question 7: How can we avoid the conflicts between human beings and elephants? Can you suggest some pointers for the same.

P.B.; If you and your future generation want to exist in this beautiful world you have to respect all the creatures of the mother earth. Live and let them live equally. The corridor of elephant has now disappeared. I appeal to all the people and Government to connect the corridor with river side national parks up to hills. No man's zones should develop around these areas.

Question 8: According to you what is the most crucial problem faced by the Asiatic elephants?

P.B.; We see that Asian elephants' habitat is shrinking fast and wild elephant populations are mostly small, isolated, and unable to mingle as ancient migratory routes are cut off by human settlements. Large development projects and spreading human settlements have fragmented the large elephant habitat into small fragments.

We get to hear about the incidents of elephants raiding crops and villages. So as a result there is retaliation by villagers which often results in killings of these elephants. We see these to be the leading cause of elephant deaths in Asia. When it comes to Asian elephants, only males carry tusks and therefore poaching is aimed exclusively at males. Selective removal of tuskers for their ivory may lead to an increase in the proportion of tuskless males in the population. Elephants are also taken from the wild for the live elephant trade – primarily going to Thailand for the tourism industry.

So to save the elephants from the verge of extinction is the biggest problem.

Question 9: Do you have any future plans associated with elephants?

P.B.; There is now a dream and plan associated with elephants, because elephants are not like but purely my family members. I respect them as the only living god, let's see how can I go forward.

Question 10: Would you like to give a message to the people in respect to your experience throughout the life with wild and domestic elephants?

P.B. ; Well, already I told you about many experiences. To experience up to this level someone has to sacrifice all the comforts of life. I don't advise others to do this but please respect nature and try to understand its power.

Question 11. It was a great time with you by knowing all the wonderful facts of your life and before concluding I would like to thank for your valuable time.

P.B.; Thanks to you too for considering me as a resourceful person for your research on elephants and it was nice to meet you.