

# GAJAH

SECURING THE FUTURE FOR THE ELEPHANT  
IN INDIA



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**Ministry of Environment and Forests**  
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA



THE ASIAN ELEPHANT (*ELEPHAS MAXIMUS*) IS A POWERFUL CULTURAL SYMBOL IN MANY ASIAN COUNTRIES, REVERED AS GANAPATI OR VINAYAKA, THE LORD WHO BLESSES NEW BEGINNINGS.

THE ORIGIN OF *GAJAH* COMES FROM SANSKRIT AND MEANS ELEPHANT. IT PERSONIFIES WISDOM, ABUNDANCE, RICHNESS, FERTILITY, BOLDNESS AND STRENGTH.

THE ASIAN ELEPHANT TASK FORCE REPORT IS A CULMINATION OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF EXPERTS TO SECURE THE FUTURE FOR *GAJAH* IN INDIA. VERY IMPORTANTLY, IT RECOGNIZES THAT THE CAUSE OF *GAJAH* SHOULD BE TAKEN TO THE *PRAJA*, THE COMMON PEOPLE.

GAJAH IS THE ELEPHANT TASK FORCE REPORT ON HOW TO SECURE THE FUTURE FOR ELEPHANTS IN INDIA.



## THE LIVES OF ELEPHANTS...

Elephants are social beings living in a matriarchal society with the oldest female leading the herd and assuming the responsibility of decision making. Males when they are 10 to 15 years old, move away from the herd. Adult males lead solitary lives, joining herds occasionally to court females. Elephants care for their young ones in the same way as we humans do. They guard against potential threats aggressively. Elephants have a long life span living to the grand old age of 70 years. They also have a remarkable memory.

## ELEPHANTS AS PART OF OUR NATIONAL HERITAGE...

The Indian sub-continent is considered to be the last remaining stronghold of the Asian elephants. With more than 26,000 elephants, it is home to more than half the global Asian elephant population in the wild. The country also has nearly 3,500 elephants in captivity. Around 4,000 years ago, an extraordinary relationship was forged between elephants and humans in India. Ever since, elephants have been prized for their ivory or 'white gold', for their utility in animal-powered transport, and most importantly for their magnificent and auspicious presence in festivities and ceremonies. This long-enduring charismatic relationship between elephants and humans is etched in the minds and hearts of millions of people, making the graceful and magnanimous animal an inseparable part of our national and cultural heritage.

Valuing the important niche that elephant has come to occupy in the socio-cultural milieu of the Indian society, the government has accorded it the status of the 'National Heritage Animal'.



## PROTECTION AND CONSERVATION OF ELEPHANTS IS A CHALLENGING TASK...

Despite best efforts of the government, the society and the people at large, elephant conservation still remains an uphill task. A coordinated and concerted effort is needed to effectively address the following challenges:

- Habitat loss, and fragmentation and degradation of elephant habitat are considered to be the primary cause for the decline in elephant numbers. It is estimated that their geographic range has shrunk by 70% since 1960s.
- Threat to life of elephants still looms large. Almost 3 out of 10 elephant deaths are attributed to illegal killing, train accidents, and electrocution etc.
- Human-elephant conflict is another major threat to the Asian elephant. Nearly 400 people and 100 elephants lose their lives due to this conflict every year.
- Only 1/4<sup>th</sup> area of all elephant reserves enjoys the status of the protected area. There is a strong need to guarantee protection to elephants by involving the local communities.
- Legal and illegal capturing of elephants in the past has resulted in disappearance of the animal in many pockets. It has been estimated that 2-4 million elephants were captured from the wild during the history of elephant domestication, with 1,00,000 alone captured in the 19th century.





# THE ELEPHANT TASK FORCE REPORT: THE WAY FORWARD...

This report makes a number of useful recommendations for institutionalizing protection and conservation of elephants. Important recommendations are:

## 1. GOVERNANCE AND LAW

Existing 32 elephant reserves span 10 landscapes. Five of these landscapes have been identified on a priority basis for immediate action relating to overall improvement in their management status including conflict resolution. Ideally, elephant reserve should comprise a network of both protected areas and other lands identified on the basis of actual movement, presence and requirement of humans and elephants.

- Constitute local management committees for each reserve with representatives of Zila Parishad, Panchayat and Gram Sabha, and scientists and veterinarians as members.
- Ensure minimum, and preferably no modification of corridors which elephants use.
- Consider on priority the modifications in the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972, explicitly suggested in the elephant task force report.

## 2. CENSUS AND STUDIES

- Identify new scientifically sound methods and ways to carry out regular census and monitoring of the animal across the country.
- Establish elephant research stations, and open air forest laboratories. Also, institute elephant fellowships and scholar exchange programmes.

### 3. CONTROLLING IVORY TRADE

- Fill vacant posts of anti-poaching staff on priority, and equip them properly.
- Create a national database facility, which records elephant mortality, and also information on crimes and criminals which can be shared amongst enforcement agencies.
- Keep supporting continuation of international ban on the ivory trade.



### 4. CARING FOR CAPTIVE ANIMALS

- Continue prohibition on use of elephants in the circus.
- Regulate effectively sale, gift, donation, lease and transfer of elephants.
- Ensure capacity building of mahouts, and also better service conditions and remuneration for them.
- Improve veterinary and holding facilities for elephants in captivity.
- Improve care and management of elephants in captivity, including skill upgradation of the attendants.



## 5. MITIGATING CONFLICT

- Commission surveys to identify conflict 'hotspots', and possible causes for conflict.
- Constitute flying squads and institute taluka level public hearings to address grievances and conflicts.
- Formulate schemes in collaboration with the private sector to provide insurance cover to crops, prone to elephant damage.
- Work out compensation packages including 'grain for grain' approach to make up for loss of crops due to conflict.
- Erect fencing and lay trenches only after thorough planning and ensuring long-term maintenance.

## 6. TAKING GAJAH TO THE PEOPLE

Elephant task force report recommends the following three pronged approach to elicit and improve involvement of people in elephant protection:

- Identify the people worst affected by human-elephant conflict. Enrol them in anti-crop depredation squads, as frontline volunteers in the forest department, in committees aimed at mitigating conflict, in elephant monitoring studies and other related programmes.
- Initiate outreach programmes aimed at educating the rural and urban people about gajah. Develop suitable rural-urban education programmes for school-going children, local youth and people's representatives. Introduce gajah-praja extension schemes for farmers duly incorporating the important elements of crop insurance, donations and technology transfer.
- Call for international co-operation and co-ordination to ensure a secure future for gajah through national and global forums that facilitate exchange of knowledge, information and ideas.





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Cover photograph : Mother with calf at Bandipur Tiger Reserve, Karnataka  
Last photograph : Elephants raiding a banana plantation, Bannerghatta National Park, Karnataka  
Images courtesy : Kalyan Varma