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Good, quarrelsome, bad: animal agency and human- elephant interactions in the Western Ghats, India

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Ecological breakdowns are posing many serious threats to the lives of both humans and wild animals in the spaces where those lives are shared. Today the intensification of conservation-related conflict is one of the main ecological challenges faced in the Western Ghats of India. This article explores some of the complex interactions between different groups of people, such as wealthy farmers, small-scale farmers, and Adivasi (indigenous) people, and Asian elephants and suggests potentially non-conflictual approaches to sharing spaces with these elephants. The study used a multispecies ethnographic approach as a primary research method and focused on detailed stories and anecdotes narrated by the inhabitants of the study area who had long experience of living with these elephants and who frequently encountered them. Based on insights offered by the stories and anecdotes, the article argues that the lives of elephants and those of people are deeply and intimately interconnected and co-constructed in the study area; such 'naturecultures' of elephants and humans constitute a complex whole. The stories highlight that most people in the study area know that elephants have agency and are intelligent, emotional beings, and can subvert human attempts to control them. According to local people, each individual elephant possesses a distinct personality: some are good, some are quarrelsome, and some are bad. People believe that, just as human beings do, elephants also perceive and respond to individual humans differently; such beliefs, and the stories created out of them, are non-anthropocentric in nature. Overall, this article explores how understanding, and treating seriously, the concepts, beliefs, and experiences of multidimensional elephant agency can be beneficial for envisioning possible new ways for human-elephant coexistence.

KEYWORDS

human-elephant relations, human-wildlife conflict, multi-species ethnography, human-animal relations, Adivasis, Western Ghats

Introduction

Humans and wildlife have lived in the same landscape and shaped each other's lives for thousands of years (Lorimer, 2015). The interaction between people and wildlife is often framed as either being positive or negative (Kretser et al., 2009). The term human-wildlife conflict (HWC) refers to the negative interactions between the two (Bhatia et al., 2020)¹. In different parts of the world, there are conflicts between local people and a wide variety of animal species, including elephants (Chartier et al., 2011) and big cats (Goodrich, 2010). In India, HWC emerges from crop raiding and predation on livestock, and in some instances, a situation where both humans and animals injure and kill each other (Karanth et al., 2013; Gulati et al., 2021). HWC is a result of the competition between them for space, food and other resources (Banerjee et al., 2013). Therefore, the expansion of human habitation, agriculture, environmental change, and the increase in the numbers of wildlife contribute to the intensification of the conflict between humans and wildlife (Mishra, 1997; Treves & Karanth, 2003). Such conflict may increase people's animosity towards wildlife, and sometime people who are affected by the conflict end up killing wildlife (Kissui, 2008; Viollaz et al., 2021). Consequently, HWCs may adversely affect both wildlife conservation and human wellbeing.

HWC mitigation interventions are influenced by the conflict studies that emphasize material approaches or physical interaction between humans and wildlife (Gubbi, 2012; Karanth et al., 2012). Most of these studies use natural science and quantitative social science approaches to study human-wildlife interaction (for a critique of such an approach see Pooley et al. (2017)). These methods though, mainly focus on the direct material losses incurred by people due to wildlife incursions and attacks and the quantification of economic loss (Karanth et al., 2018). Therefore, conflict mitigation measures are dominated by approaches such as construction of physical barriers, economic compensation and lethal control measures (Sijtsma et al., 2012; Sapkota et al., 2014; Karanth et al., 2018). However, recent literature on human-wildlife interaction shows that the direct material loss incurred by people from wild animals is only a small part of complex conservation issues. Dickman (2010) argues that different people have varied attitudes toward wild animals and suggests a more nuanced and situation-based approach to such issues. These differences result from diverse social factors such as cultural and ethnicity-based

beliefs and other orientations such as religious affiliations. Redpath et al. (2013) differentiate between HWC and conservation conflict. For them, HWC is best understood in the context of the direct interactions between people and wildlife whereas conservation conflicts usually result from the clashing of human parties over conservation goals. This conflicting state often occurs when one of the parties tries to impose its opinions on the others.

Social studies of conservation focus, in the main, on conflict. For instance, a quantitative study by Bhatia et al. (2020), shows that a large number of scientific articles on human-wildlife interaction emphasize the concept of HWC. However, in recent years, literature of human-animal studies, geography and anthropology has started moving beyond HWC framing to examine more complex relationships (e.g., coexistence and tolerance) between humans and wildlife. For example, Baynes-Rock explores how the traditional belief systems of the people who live in an around the city of Harar, Ethiopia, enable them to tolerate hyenas who occasionally attack them. According to their beliefs, 'hyenas are conceived of as beneficial to the human population due to their propensity to kill and consume unseen spirits, and their capacity to act in accordance with human societal values' (Baynes-Rock, 2013:421; Baynes-Rock, 2015). Jalais (2011) offers an account of how local people and tigers share space in the Sundarbans, India, and Aiyadurai (2016) highlights how the belief system of the Mishmi community of Northeast India, in which they consider tigers as their brothers, enables people to protect themselves from, and coexist with, tigers.

As examples of these shifts of approach, Frank (2015) idea of the conflict-to-coexistence continuum claims that conflict and coexistence are located at opposite ends of the continuum. At one end, the antagonistic attitudes of people result in extreme conflict. The degree of antagonism, and resulting conflict, of people towards wildlife decreases as it progresses towards the tolerance and coexistence end of the continuum. Between these two poles, people possess different antagonistic/tolerance orientations towards wildlife. However, the notion of antagonism should be explored in the context of specific cases to understand whether and/or how local people are in a state of conflict with wild animals or whether they are in conflict with other people about how wild animals - which intrude into human affairs and concerns - should perhaps be tolerated and treated. According to Carter and Linnell, 'coexistence is a dynamic but sustainable state in which humans and large carnivores co-adapt to living in shared landscapes where human interactions with carnivores are governed by effective institutions that ensure long-term carnivore population persistence, social legitimacy, and tolerable levels of risk' (Carter and Linnell, 2016: 575). Fletcher and Toncheva (2021), in their recent paper titled 'The Political Economy of Human-Wildlife Conflict and Coexistence', offer an important focus on power. According to them, different political and economic structures play a critical role in shaping human and wildlife interactions. Studying such structures ensures the effective implementation of strategies that address the coexistence and conflict of human and wildlife. Pooley et al. (2021: 785), point out that 'coexistence does not presume the absence of conflict...'. For Hill (2021), conflict is an integral part of multispecies coexistence. According to her, since human-wildlife interactions are highly complex, the dualist

¹ The terms 'negative attitudes' and 'positive attitudes' are commonly used in the literature of human-wildlife relations. However, in our view they merely indicate some form of opposites – negative is not positive and positive is not negative – but offer nothing in the way of explication as to the nature of the attitudes in all their complexities. In this article we offer the terms 'antagonistic orientations' and 'tolerance orientations' as substitutes for 'negative attitudes' and 'positive attitudes' as ends points of a continuum. Although as stand-alone terms antagonism and tolerance do not capture the nuances of and complex constructions of the experiences and practices relating to attitudes and orientations, we believe they are captured within the ethnographic exploration and exposition of the stories and anecdotes that are the focus of much of this article.

frameworks of conflict-to-coexistence cannot adequately represent this interaction.

In some Eurocentric ways of thinking, humans are considered above nature and not part of it; instead, they control/tame nature. This view asserts that human wellbeing is independent of nature's wellbeing (Tsing, 2013). Therefore, conservation and modern agriculture/development, which are highly influenced by Eurocentric worldviews, assume that humans and wild animals belong in different places. For instance, wild animals properly belong in spaces of nature while people properly belong in spaces of culture. The concept of coexistence provides opportunities to think beyond the western knowledge system by appreciating local ways of knowing and recognizing agency and subjectivity of wildlife (Pooley, 2021). However, the analysis of Massarella and Fiasco, shows that 'coexistence is still being framed within Western ways of knowing (for example by quantifying attitudes and behaviors) that align with the values and objectives of conservationists' (Massarella and Fiasco, 2022: 172).

As suggested by Ingold & Pálsson (2013) and Schroer (2021) 'the relational way of thinking', an approach which is influenced by aspects of indigenous ways of seeing, understanding, and engaging with the world, may help scholars understand and communicate new ways of coexistence between people and wildlife. Since this article aims to move away from simple positive vs. negative characterizations of human-wildlife interactions the multispecies anthropological approach is helpful to integrate the relational ways of thinking when studying human and wildlife interactions.

Multispecies anthropology (Marvin & McHugh, 2014; Haraway, 2016; Locke, 2018) challenges the idea of human exceptionalism and calls for a decentering of the human. The multispecies approach recognizes 'the interconnectedness and inseparability between humans and non-humans' (Locke & Muenster, 2015:1) while highlighting the subjectivity and agency of non-human organisms (Govindrajan, 2018)

The present study explores some of the complex interactions between wealthy planters, small-scale farmers, and Adivasi (indigenous) people, and Asian elephants. It uses a multispecies ethnographic approach¹ as the primary research method to explore the research question: How do people living with Asian elephants in the

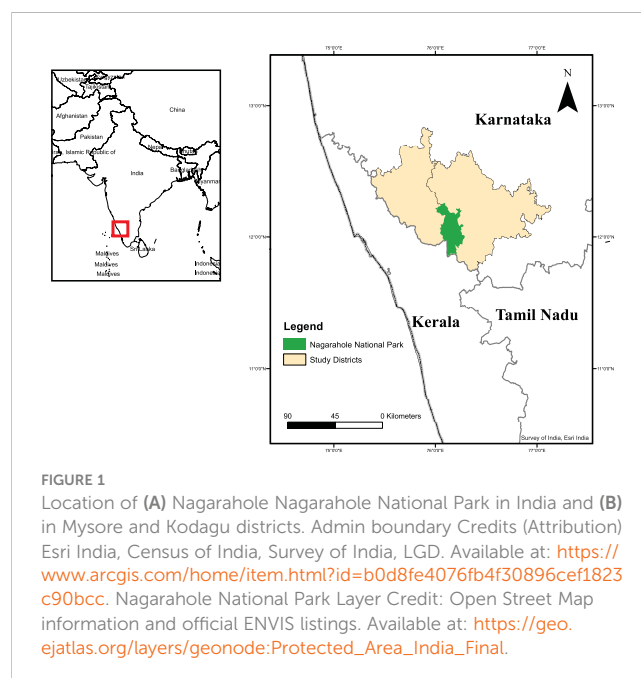
¹ A key element of this project was to attempt to explore, and understand, notions of elephant agency. However, there is a limitation here in that it was impossible to learn, directly from them, how this agency was experienced by them. Our understand has come from engaging with how local people experienced, understood, and engaged with such agency. The principal investigator has been able to report on, and sometimes witnessed, how people spoke with elephants – greeting them, offering salutations to them, scolding them, and beseeching them to leave and not intrude. Elephants also initiated communication with people through their vocalisations indicating a range of emotions from calm lack of concern, agitation, to displeasure or anger. Such vocalisations were interpreted as conversations between elephants and humans. Bhat Dundi was also able to observe, and listen to, the verbal and bodily communication between tamed elephants and those responsible for their care. However, in this project he did not have the time to develop such communication skills with any elephants, wild or tame.

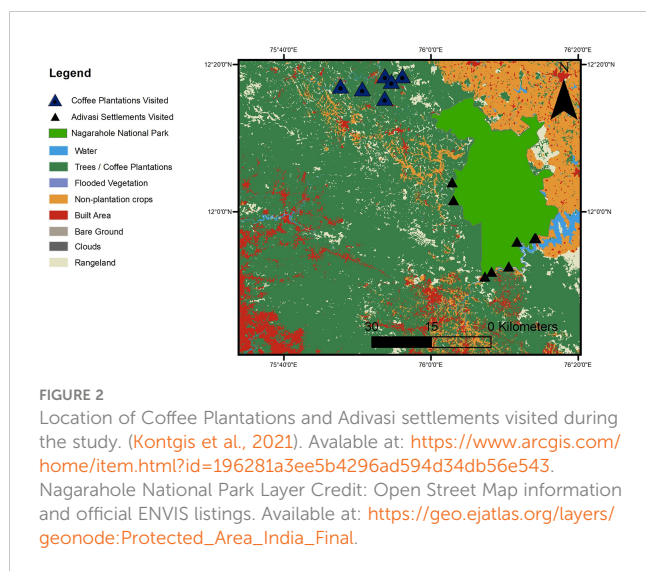
Western Ghats of India conceptualize the interactions of human and wild Asian elephants beyond the narrow framing of conflict/coexistence? In this article the focus is on detailed stories and anecdotes narrated by these people, to describe how both Asian elephants and people negotiate and struggle to share space and resources with each other.

Materials and methods

Study area

This study was carried out in both protected areas (Nagarahole Tiger Reserve and the Reserve Forests Kodagu) and agricultural areas located in the Kodagu District (Figure 1). Both the Kodagu and Nagarahole Tiger Reserve are located in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, the Western Ghats. In this region, plantations are a dominant form of land use. The plantations situated in the Northern and Western borders of Nagarahole National Park and belong to the Kodagu District (Figure 2). The plantations in this region primarily engage in the cultivation of coffee under the shade of tree canopies, along with mixed crops of areca nut and black pepper. Furthermore, rice is cultivated in small quantities in the valleys, while the coffee plantations are interspersed with fragments of forests (Nesper et al., 2017). Today, Kodagu is one of the major coffee-producing districts in India and contributes around 33% to the total national production (Garcia et al., 2007). After the Coffee Board permitted an open market for coffee in the 1990s, there was an increase in coffee prices and this resulted in a further increase in coffee plantations (Ambinakudige, 2006). Between 1977 and 2007 30% of the forest was destroyed for coffee plantations to double the coffee production in the Kodagu district (Garcia et al., 2007). Plantations carry the history of the displacement of native people and wild animals in the Western Ghats during the colonial and postcolonial period.





Elephants

High biodiversity and high endemism make the Western Ghats one of the biodiversity hotspots of the world. Censuses from 2002 to 2005 and from 2007 to 2010, estimate some 10,000 wild Asian elephants living in the Western Ghats. Of these, around 5900 live in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (Baskaran, 2013) which was set up as part of an effort to protect biodiversity. According to earlier research, elephants may migrate seasonally between the eastern and western parts of the Kodagu district, passing through the district's coffee plantations and human habitats (Bal et al., 2011). Additionally, some elephants find refuge and sustenance in coffee estates, surrounding acacia and eucalyptus plantations, and forest patches throughout the year (Kumar et al., 2018; Krishnan et al., 2019) however, there are not enough studies of the movement pattern of elephants in the agroforestry regions of Kodagu District (Narayana, 2014) to map these precisely.

Conservation

A total of 88 protected areas occupies nearly 15% of the Western Ghats' landmass. The Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 provided the legal framework and strengthened the protected area networks. The government exclusively controls and manages these protected areas because the establishment and management of protected areas are strongly influenced by national concerns for conservation. However, in terms of these concerns for conservation, it is felt that people and wildlife cannot coexist because the presence of people in the forest causes resource degradation and thereby threatens wildlife (Kabra, 2009). During the colonial era, Nagarahole was designated as a reserve forest. In 1955, 284 square kilometers of the forest attained the status of a wildlife sanctuary. In 1988 the Nagarahole Wildlife Sanctuary was officially declared a national park, covering an area of 640 square kilometers. In 1999, it was granted the status of a Tiger Reserve (DeFries et al., 2010). The Nagarahole Tiger Reserve, together with the Bandipur and Mudumalai Tiger Reserves and

the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuaries, constitutes an important contiguous forest area in the Western Ghats region (Gubbi, 2012). The Nagarahole Tiger Reserve is predominantly moist deciduous forest, which is concentrated in the southern and eastern regions and accounts for approximately 60 percent of the total area. Dry deciduous and scrub forests are present in the eastern and northeastern parts of the Tiger Reserve. On the western side, a few patches of semi-evergreen forests are located. In addition, roughly 87 square kilometers of teak, as well as a few hectares of eucalyptus, coffee plantations, and swampy areas, are located inside the Tiger Reserve (Mahanty, 2002).

Adivasi

The term 'Adivasi' was first used in India in 1938 (Rycroft & Dasgupta, 2011). Although the literal meaning of the term 'Adivasi' is 'original inhabitants of a given place', it is used as a substitute for the word 'tribal' in India. Jenu Kuruba people are one of the many Adivasi groups living in the region. In this article we explore only relationships between the Jenu Kuruba people and elephants.

The main occupation of the Jenu Kuruba people has been honey collection ('Jenu' means 'honey' in Kannada) from the forest. However, the enactment of wildlife conservation laws initiated the second phase of displacement of these people (Mahanty, 2002). Although some Adivasi families left the forest, others resisted the evacuation and are residing in the forest, fighting for their rights to live there under terms of the Forest Rights Act 2006. Wildlife conservation laws have now made it mandatory to obtain special permission from the government to collect honey from protected areas. Therefore, many Jenu Kuruba people have moved away from their primary occupation. Nowadays they work as coffee plantation laborers and elephant trainers. Jenu Kurubas are one of the 75 Adivasi groups that are classified as particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs) by the government of India. PVTGs are more vulnerable than other Adivasi groups in India due to their decreasing population, extremely low literacy levels, and poor economic circumstances (Sahani and Nandy, 2013). The population of Jenu Kuruba people in the state of Karnataka is estimated to be between 30,000 to 35,000 (Richardson et al., 2020).

Planters

In contemporary Kodagu, two major corporations, the Tata Coffee and the Bombay Burmah Timber Company (BBTC), own significant amounts of the coffee plantations. Other than the corporations, individuals from different communities, such as Kodavas, Brahmins, Syrian Christians, Muslims and Gowdas, cultivate coffee. Of these, Kodavas are the largest community. Although a majority of planters in Kodagu hold less than 10 hectares of land, they are still considerably wealthier than the Adivasi people.

Since the pre-colonial period, many Kodavas have owned a special category of heritable land called *jamma*. The land was granted to Kodavas by the Raja of Kodagu in exchange for their

military and other services to the Kingdom (Vijaya, 1993). The Raja also provided them with agricultural slaves to cultivate the land. After the British occupied Kodagu, Kodavas helped the British suppress the rebellion in the colonial period, including Canara Rebellion in 1837 (Srinivas, 2003). Since the colonial government was dependent on Kodavas and other *jamma* holders for military and police services in Kodagu, the British provided free land to them and exempted them from the Indian Arms Act in 1861, allowing them to possess guns without a license (Vijaya, 1993). Some Kodavas own substantially large pieces of land in Kodagu, and they are relatively wealthy. They live in large houses, and some have built tourist resorts and homestays on their land.

Ethnography

A key, foundational, element or perspective characterizing ethnographic research/methods is that of 'being there' and 'being with' those with whom we study/research. As an aside, we follow Tim Ingold's position that ethnographic engagements should never be framed as being with *subjects* of research, a demeaning categorization. As Ingold phrases it, ethnographers, although he includes other researchers, 'learn *from* those *with* whom ... we study' (Ingold, 2013: 2 emphasis in original). The title of Daniel Bradburd's ethnographic research with the pastoralist Komachi people of Iran, 'Being There: The Necessity of Fieldwork' (Bradburd, 1998) succinctly captures a fundamental requirement of ethnographic research, the *necessity* of fieldwork.

The fieldwork, on which this article is based, started with the best contacts the principal researcher, Bhat Dundi, could find. These people then introduced him to others, and gradually his web of interlocutors widened. Some he met for one-off conversations or interviews but in general, relationships were developed over time as he immersed himself in the daily lives of people and their engagements with elephants.

Fieldwork began in the Viraj Pete taluk (Sub-district) of Kodagu District in December 2015 where Bhat Dundi spent three months conducting ethnographic fieldwork². In 2018 he returned to the field site to continue ethnographic fieldwork for a Ph.D. project. During the 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork, he travelled extensively in and around the Nagarahole Tiger Reserve and visited several plantations, and Adivasi settlements. During his interactions with Adivasi people, he learned that they were very keen on talking about their forest rights and activism issues. Therefore, conversations usually started by asking them questions about their history, their life before migrating to the current settlements, and their relationships with the Forest Department. Slowly, he would try to shift the conversation towards their interactions with elephants, asking them how they protected their crops from elephants, how they avoided elephants while carrying honey out of the forest, when they last had a close encounter with an elephant, and what they did if elephants chased them and so on. Although these questions helped

shift the dialogue towards elephants, in most instances, the conversations went way beyond answers to these specific questions. For hours, people told stories about elephants. They showed elephant footprints and dung near their houses, damaged crops, uprooted coconut trees, broken legs of people attacked by elephants, elephant temples, elephant carcasses, roads and forest paths used by elephants, trees on which elephants rub their body to get relief from itching, and trees up which interlocutors climbed to escape elephants. All these stories were narrated in minute detail. On the plantations he conducted open-ended interviews with planters and laborers who interact with wild elephants almost every day.

By the end of the fieldwork, Bhat Dundi had conducted 250 open-ended interviews, all in the local language, Kannada, and recorded around 150 conversations using digital voice recorders, with his interlocutors' permission. He transcribed all the recordings and translated them into English. After carefully reading the translated material, he set out the stories in context by combining the narratives of people and own observations.³

Results

Plantation elephants

Within a few days of starting fieldwork, Bhat Dundi heard that an elephant's dead body was floating in an irrigation tank inside the coffee plantation and visited the site. After the carcass had been dragged out of the irrigation tank, when media reporters asked a forest official about the cause of death, he refused to speculate before the planned postmortem. The reporters then moved towards a group of planters and local leaders. Mr. Kollida Dharmaj, an ex-member of the Zilla panchayat (district council) and a local planter came forward and stood before the microphones (there were approximately six from different news channels) and cameras. He prefaced his remarks by claiming to speak on behalf of the local planters.

Since the elephant problem is intensifying day by day, it is hard to live here. Within the limits of our village around 15 to 20 elephants are living in the plantations. The elephants are so fierce that everyone in the area is scared to leave their houses and thinks twice before going out. Since we cannot predict elephants' movements, our children are terrified to walk even to nearby schools. Elephants have destroyed hundreds of coconut trees, thousands of areca nut trees, and vast acres of paddy (rice crop) in our area. A couple of years ago, when a planter from the neighboring village lost his leg in an elephant attack, we staged a dharna (sit-in) and protested against the Forest Department and the government. Initially, higher officers sent local officers (juniors) to negotiate with us. However, local officials are helpless; they do not have the power to take any significant decisions to solve the problem of human-elephant conflict. Therefore, we continued dharna until the Chief Wildlife Warden visited us. He

³ The University of Roehampton's Ethics Committee approved this research, and its methods, on 23/02/2018. Ethics application reference number is **LSC18/225**. The article makes substantial use of the content presented in the Doctoral and MPhil thesis of Bhat Dundi (2017, 2022).

² This fieldwork was the basis for his MPhil dissertation: 'Living with Elephants: Conservation and Plantations in the Western Ghats, India'.

promised us that the Forest Department would capture at least six ferocious elephants from the plantations within a month. However, they did not catch a single elephant from our area. Instead, they captured two elephants from a plantation owned by a senior forest officer of our district.

...Although a few planters shoot and kill elephants, we are sympathetic to the elephants. The Forest Department is responsible for the death of elephants in the plantations. Due to their (Forest Department) carelessness, elephants are crossing forest boundaries and entering the plantations. We have told Forest Department officers many times over the last few years to either capture and relocate the elephants from plantations or displace us, the planters. We told them that if the government gave us five million Indian rupees per acre⁴, we would be willing to sell the plantation to the government and settle down in the cities. They can purchase the plantations from us and merge them with the forests. It is good for both people and elephants. Today, through you (the media), we demand that the government find a permanent solution for the human-elephant conflict.

Although there are exceptions, in this study area elephants usually leave the forest during the evening, spend the night in the agricultural areas and return to the forest in the early morning. Sometimes, solitary male elephants – named *Onti salalag* in the local language – and large elephant herds stay in the coffee plantations for months (occasionally for years). Several interlocutors commented that some elephants even gave birth in these plantations and that the elephants born in a coffee plantation are plantation elephants; their home is the plantation.

When an individual elephant become a so-called rogue elephant and starts to threaten the life of workers, injuring or killing them, work ceases in these plantations. As there is a shortage of plantation laborers in this region, many planters do not want to lose workers. Often, with the help of the forest department staff, they chase the elephants away from the coffee plantations. If the forest department does not respond effectively to their request, some planters fire small pellets to scare and chase away these elephants. Although these pellets rarely kill them, they are highly painful and create wounds on their bodies. However, there are rare occasions when planters kill elephants by shooting or electrocuting them. If the elephant is highly ferocious and killing many people and damaging property, then many local organizations such as labor unions and planters' associations come together in protest for its capture. On many occasions, even the local politicians and media join the protesters. It is worth noting that the chances of capturing an elephant responsible increase if the attacking elephant happens to kill planters rather than plantation laborers.

Stories of human-wildlife negotiation

Stories of human and elephant conflict are prevalent in the study area. However, during the field work it became apparent that some elephants and people are negotiating with each other to share

space and resources. Since we are largely interested in understanding how people and elephants attempt to modify their behavior/culture to live together, we will narrate stories and anecdotes of human-elephant negotiation in the following paragraphs.

Good and bad elephants

Some stories narrated by planters and many Jenu Kuruba people indicated that for some people, 'elephants' is not merely a generic species term, but instead each individual elephant is different. According to them elephants possess unique, individual, characters as humans do; some are good elephants (*Olle aane*) and some are bad elephants (*Kedi*) and in the next few paragraphs, we will present anecdotes related to elephant personality.

Appu, a resident of Kodangi settlement which is located inside the National Park took Bhat Dundi to his house which had been damaged by elephants three months earlier. He did not try to repair it because he did not know when the elephant would come back and break it again. Instead, he built a new small tree house in the tree next to his house in which he kept all his groceries and pots. His family cooked and slept outside the broken house in the open area next to the fire, like many other people in the settlements whose houses had also been damaged by elephants. Many residents of the settlement said that these elephants do not do anything to the people except eat the foodstuffs inside their houses. While sleeping in the open area during the night they often saw elephants walking around twenty or thirty meters from them and yet they never came close or hurt anyone in the settlement. According to residents of the settlements, these are *Olle aane* (good elephants) because they move away when people shine torches and shout. However, *Kedi aane* (bad/scoundrel elephants) try to attack people.

Once Ramesh, Putta, and their friends (all belonging to the Jenu Kuruba community) were walking in the forest when the same *Kedi aane* followed them for almost a kilometer. Usually, good elephants reveal their presence by making sounds by breaking twigs, beating their ears or breathing loudly when they realize that people are walking towards them, and even if people approach them accidentally, they do not attack people instead they mock charge to scare people. However, it seemed to Ramesh and Putta that the *Kedi aane* stood silently, without revealing his presence and intent on attacking them.

Quarrelsome elephants

Two years before the interview with him, Vipin, an around 35 years old planter, said that a male elephant attacked his brother. While his brother was walking along a road near his house, a male elephant suddenly chased him and pushed him to the ground. Then the elephant tried three times to gore him with its tusks. Fortunately, because the tusks were very wide apart, his brother was caught between them, and the elephant could not kill him. Vipin explained that despite seeing the elephant's strange behavior (including its unusual head and body movement) near a bush close

4 Approximately £50,000 or \$60,000

to the road, approximately fifty to sixty meters from his house, he did not realize that the elephant was trying to gore his brother. Since the elephant was behaving unusually, Vipin and his family members thought that the elephant might be in a *musth* (rut). Therefore, Vipin and his family members began pursuing the elephant, setting off firecrackers, shouting, and throwing stones at it. When the elephant moved away from Vipin's brother, he got up and ran home. According to Vipin, when the elephant knocked him down, his brother fell on shrubs growing in a slushy area, with both the soft ground and the shrubs serving as a cushion, and his brother was not injured much. After some time, the elephant returned to the spot where it attacked Vipin's brother and started searching for him. Again, Vipin chased the elephant away by setting off firecrackers.

When asked why he thought the elephant had returned to the spot of the attack, Vipin suggested that in some instances, elephants who were injured by gunshots had attacked people. So, Vipin thought, someone could have shot pellets and wounded this particular elephant. Several planters and laborers claimed that one of the main reasons for the increase in the number of quarrelsome elephants today is the shooting and injuring of elephants. According to them, quarrelsome elephants intentionally destroy crops such as coffee and areca nut, damage property, and attack people when people injure or chase them.

Kartik, a Forest Department staff member, shared a video to explain how an elephant he identified as a matriarch, purposefully uprooted a couple of coffee plants when the Forest Department staff tried to chase off a group of four elephants. Kartik was sitting in a tree and video-recording the incident when the other members were chasing the elephants. This large matriarch ran towards the tree Kartik was sitting in, trumpeted a couple of times, and pushed over a coffee tree that was in her way. Thereafter, she moved directly under the tree and stood there for a couple of seconds. She then rushed in another direction, violently uprooting more coffee trees, trumpeting all the while. Once again, the elephant ran back and stood under the same tree for a while before running in another direction to damage more trees. Once again, it was suggested that this was a quarrelsome elephant who was expressing her antagonism towards people (although not necessarily these specific individuals) who had previously bothered her.

***Ajja* elephant (Grand Father elephant) is a good elephant**

Vipin showed some photographs of elephants that visited his plantations some ten years ago. He pointed out the photograph of a huge male elephant with long tusks; it was a picture of an *Ajja* (Grandfather) elephant. According to Vipin and his father, *Ajja* elephant's large body, long tusks, and human-friendly behavior made him an ideal elephant. Many other planters of the areas also praised the *Ajja* elephant who they claimed visited a coffee plantation and ate jack fruit. However, he never hurt anyone, even when people walked close to him. Since he walked on the path (mainly constructed for vehicle and human use) inside the coffee plantations, he never damaged any plants or trees. Thus,

people respected him; with buses and other vehicles stopping to allow him to make his across the path and onto the main road. Vipin had taken the photographs of the *Ajja* elephant from as close as ten to fifteen feet.

Elephants attack people only if people trouble elephants

Appayya, a planter approximately 70 years old, used to hunt when he was young and is now part of a local conservation group. He is a large-scale farmer with a coffee plantation of more than a hundred acres. Appayya explained that elephants do not harm people who do not pose a threat to them. He narrated an anecdote to explain it further. Appayya never tried to chase away elephants with firecrackers or by firing gunshots and no elephant had harmed him until now, although they walked very close to him many times. Once, when he was repairing a sprinkler system on his estate, a male elephant walked next to him (within a few feet from him). When he saw the elephant at such a close distance, he was terrified. However, the elephant did not panic; he walked away calmly.

According to Appayya, elephants are cautious when visiting a plantation where they were attacked and injured before. In addition to that, elephants can remember people who injured them by shooting and chasing them off by bursting crackers. For instance, not long before this conversation, a 68-year-old planter was killed by a matriarch when he was walking in his plantation during the day. The planter used to throw fire crackers and fire fake gunshots whenever he saw elephants on his estate; consequently, the elephant had killed him, apparently in revenge.

Shree and Jayanna are both wealthy planters who also share Appayya's opinion. Shree recounted that most of the time elephants visit his plantation after seven in the evening and leave for the forest early in the morning. He tries to avoid elephants by not going out of the house from evening until morning. He claimed that the period between dusk and dawn rightly belongs to wild animals and people should not venture out at that time. Although elephants damaged around 50 -60 coffee plants and a few pipes in his plantation every year, they never attacked him. Shree believes that since he avoids elephants and never attacks them, they are not a threat to his life.

According to Jayanna, elephants are very calm animals, but they panic and attack people when they are chased. Jayanna showed the ample space left for elephants to walk beside his car, which was parked in front of his house. He told that even though elephants used the area to walk from the main road to his plantation, they never touched his car. His sister's son created a path for the elephants to walk in his estate by clearing plants on, and along, the path. Since then, elephants use the path to move inside the plantations, they had almost stopped stepping on or tearing up coffee plants. Therefore, on his estate, plant damage by elephants is relatively slight.

Tourism and hospitality have been a rapidly growing industry in Kodagu in the last few years, and many national and international tourists visit Kodagu every year. Bopanna is a planter who also runs a homestay tourism business on his estate. He disclosed that when elephants visit his estate, he is happy because elephants attract

tourists. Although elephants eat coffee plants on his plantation, he is not bothered, because he extracts coffee beans from elephant dung to make coffee from them. According to him, his guests (tourists) loved drinking elephant-dung coffee. Since tourists love to watch elephants, when elephants visit his plantation, he takes the tourists onto the terrace of the homestay to show them how elephants eat coffee and how they bathe in an irrigation pond located in his plantation. Bopanna claimed another benefit from the presence of elephants. Thieves are afraid of elephants, and if elephants frequently visit the farm, there is no theft.

Because Appayya Shri, Bopanna, and Jayanna all consider elephants to be no danger to them and their property unless people distress them, they certainly do not attempt to drive elephants away when they visit their estate.

Not all the seeds we sow will germinate, not all the crops we grow belongs to us

After walking in and around the Adivasi settlements such as Bavali, Ane mala, Macchur and Bayrana Kuppe and having talked to people who lived in these settlements, Bhat Dundi realized that these settlements were situated between the forest and the Kabini River, one of the major rivers in this region and a primary source of water for elephants. The majority of the elephants who live in this area walk through the settlements daily to drink water and to bathe in the river. When asked how the inhabitants of settlements protected their crops such as paddy, ragi, and other vegetable crops from such a large number of elephants, Parvati, a Jenu Kuruba woman, who was around 50 years old, said:

Forest animals such as elephants, tigers, wild boar, deer, and the Adivasi people all belong to the same forest, we together make up one group. For generations, we have drunk water from the same water hole, eaten the same fruits and tubers. These animals that also belong to the same forest, eat some portion of the crop grown in the forest (forest enclosure) by people; they have the right to take their share because they also want to lead a good life and care for their young. Our ancestors used to say that elephants should walk on the agriculture fields at least once a year to get a good yield and many people even today believe that. If you have ever practiced farming in your life, you would know that you cannot expect to germinate all the seeds you sow, in the same way, you should not expect to eat all the crops you grow.

Similar to Parvati's argument, many Jenu Kuruba people believe that if elephants ate a portion of the crops grown by them it was a blessing and the crop yield would increase. For example, some Jenu Kuruba men assert that if elephants put their hands (in the study area people called elephant trunks 'hands') on a clump of bananas and eat one or two plants then the clump will give birth to the more plants and produce more bananas.

Elephants who punish

Adivasi people were asked why the people who belong to the farming community such as planters complain that elephants and

other wild animals destroy their crops, while the Adivasis treat forest animals as part of their community and share food with them. Parvati and other Adivasi people of the settlement replied that people from the farming community trouble elephants and other forest animals who visit their farmland by bursting crackers, throwing stones, and sometimes even shooting elephants. Besides, they do not worship the forest deity, which is why elephants eat their crops almost every night and do not allow farmers to sleep during the harvest season.

Somayya, a Jenu Kuruba leader of the Bommadu settlement, claimed that when people do something wrong, their god comes in the form of elephants, tigers, snakes, or other animals and trouble them. He indicated, with a hand gesture, large tracts of coffee plantations and commented that such plantations were forests around 20–30 years ago. According to the Somayya, the forest was inhabited by a variety of wild animals and the Adivasi people *together*. Some of the Adivasi deities still reside inside the coffee plantations. Even today, Jenu Kuruba people worship the deities who inhabit these coffee plantations. However, the rich people cut the forests and planted coffee, not even leaving the sacred grove for the Jenu Kuruba people. The coffee plantations displaced the Adivasi people and the wildlife, including elephants, from their forests. As stated by many Adivasi people, elephants are now entering the plantations and have started destroying the coffee crops and started eating the coffee, bananas, and jackfruits because these people made the grave mistake of establishing plantations on the land which was once a forest and the sacred groves of the deities (Bhat Dundi, 2017).

Boja, a retired forest watcher from the Jenu Kuruba community, said that if the elephants wanted to kill them, destroy their houses or raid their crops, they would do that anytime, however elephants only trouble people when those people commit *Papa*⁵ (crime/sin). Like Somayya and Bhoja, many Adivasi people believe that an elephant is an incarnation of a god who will punish people who commit *Papa* (crime/sin) against customary rules. In the Jenu Kuruba settlement of Nanachi there is an entire temple devoted to elephants. If they are troubled by an elephant, they request the elephant deity not to trouble them and assure it that they won't commit any *Papa*.

Discussion

Although the Adivasi people and a few planters from our study area told stories of negotiation, for generations, between humans and non-human animals, most planters do not want to share space and resources with elephants and have been demanding the removal of elephants from agricultural land. One of the main reasons is that Indian conservation policies are influenced by European sociocultural thinking about what constitutes 'nature' and what 'culture' and need for the separation of both. Writing

5 "Papa" can be defined as a mistake, error, sin, or something done incorrectly.

about the specificities of such separations, one Indian historian commented:

Clearly, however one thinks of human futures, one condition set by European political thinkers of modernity will have to hold in any definition of the political: humans will need protection from predators (Chakrabarty, 2021: 194-195)

Agriculture, animal domestication, and the rise of modern cities demanded more safety from predators and wildlife. To keep humans safe from other living beings, stories of human dominance spread and flourished in the modern world (Chakrabarty, 2021).

In the modern Western imagination, agriculture has been conceptualized as taming or transforming nature into culture, by civilizing humanity, through land clearance and fencing (Saltzman et al., 2011). According to the narratives of early human history, agriculture helped humans build a civilization by moving away from being subjugated to nature, to establishing dominance over nature (O'Gorman & van Dooren, 2017).

Indian agriculture also transformed during both the colonial and postcolonial periods. The policies of colonial and postcolonial governments helped the modernization/industrialization of Indian agriculture. Governments promoted, and continue, promoting intensive agriculture practices in India by providing subsidized electricity, chemical fertilizers, and irrigation and other water systems (Gupta, 2017). As a result, many regions of the country experienced a deviation in the relationship between agriculture and the forest. Modern agricultural practices not only affect the ecology of the country but also have a significant impact on the cultures of farming communities such as a shift in local agriculture values and practices to an orientation to wider market demands (Vasavi, 1994). For instance, some studies have highlighted how the neo-liberalization of agriculture (Münster & Münster, 2012; Narayana, 2014) and economic forces (Margulies & Karanth, 2018) have, in recent years, transformed the human-wildlife relationships in South India.

Since the concept of human exceptionalism believes that humans stand above ecology and the lives of non-human animals (Smith, 2013), for conservation attitudes and practices to be successful, there is a need to build new systems of sociocultural and political thought, orientations, and practice that can overcome human dominance stories to generate new potential ways to coexist with non-humans. Chakrabarty (2021) argues that to build such a system of thought, 'we would need to find ways of combining elements of both wonderment and reverence⁶ in our relationship to places we inhabit' (2021:201). Adivasi stories, presented in this article, can provide valuable insights for building such a system of thought and orientation.

Our findings suggest that how effectively people and elephants negotiate with each other to share space and resources mainly depends on the belief system and culture of people as well as the

behavior and culture of wildlife. Most of the Adivasi people and a few planters are tolerant of elephants because they strongly believe that (based on the stories presented in this article) elephants are thinking and feeling beings who may accept humans, resist humans, subvert human intelligence and technologies of containment and separation, and punish people when they commit *Papa*.

We argue that it is necessary to think beyond the narrow understanding of scientific rationality to make sense of stories narrated by Adivasi people and a few planters that represent a different mode of reason, outside of the lens of Enlightenment ideas which create a sharp distinction between nature and culture, as well as knowledge and belief (Du Plessis, 2018). This way of worldmaking is deeply rooted in the Adivasi cosmology which is completely aware that non-humans, including elephants, possess agency and intelligence, and as such are not objects/subjects over which humans believe they have, and can assert, superiority.

Awareness that non-humans possess agency and intelligence is not new to some Indian traditions. Anthropologists have documented similar stories of non-human agencies from other parts of India. 'In the Indian epics - and this is a tradition that remains vibrantly alive to this day - there is a completely matter-of-fact acceptance of the agency of non-human beings of many kinds' (Ghosh, 2016:64). For instance, Govindrajana (2015) explains that some people of the Himalayas think deities send man-eaters to punish humans who angered the deity, and according to Mathur (2021), people of the Himalayas believe that the big cats which turn into man-eaters do so to take revenge on the people who killed their family members.

Many current wildlife conservation programs assume that a species or individuals' behavior in one context will remain largely unchanged in another and that individuals of the same species behave uniformly' (Edelblutte et al., 2022: 8). However, the concept of specific animal agencies allows us to acknowledge that an animal can learn to respond to human actions by modifying their behavior and culture (Goumas et al., 2020). The work of Brakes et al. (2021) demonstrates how studying animal cultures and the social learning of animals is helpful in conservation management. They also argue that 'social learning can also be exploited to ameliorate the human-wildlife conflict' (Brakes et al., 2019:1). Therefore, some scholars suggest considering animals as active conservation agents (Gibbs, 2021; Edelblutte et al., 2022).

In contrast to the general trend in conservation science, which tends to view conservation problems from a global perspective, we suggest that insights from a place-based conservation approach are more effective in addressing the issues of human-wildlife conflict/coexistence. For instance, in the study area, causality attributed to an elephant's attack, including punishment of people who committed *Papa* and elephants' behavior in response to landscape change is one of the important factors which influence the relationships developed between local people and local elephants. In addition to that, as argued by Bhattacharyya and Slocombe (2017), the knowledge of local people who interact with or observe wildlife in their everyday life, elephants in our case, is crucial for understanding the behavior and social learning of local individual elephants as well as local elephant groups. Since anecdotes and stories 'help to help elucidate complex questions of behavior and

6 According to Chakrabarty (2021: 198) 'Reverence is not simply about curiosity, wonderment, or biophilia. Reverence suggests a relationship of respect mixed in with fear and awe, with proto-Italic roots that mean to be wary'.

culture' of animals/wildlife (Lestel et al., 2014: 129) we argue that the stories of local people presented in the article provide valuable insights into the behavior and social learning of local elephants. For instance, the story of the *Ajja* elephant reveals that some individual elephants can learn to live peacefully with humans. The story of Ayyappa explained how some elephants remembered the plantations where they were attacked and the people who attacked them. These stories also highlighted how elephants behaved differently with different people and in the contexts of different land use. For example, Adivasi stories explained that elephants are more ferocious inside the plantations than in the forest. In this context, local ecological knowledge, values, beliefs and cosmologies of Adivasi people are as important as economic calculations and legal enforcement for the management of human-elephant conflict/coexistence.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by University of Roehampton's Ethics Committee approved this research on 23/02/2018. Ethics application reference number is LSC18/225. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

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Author contributions

All the authors designed the study and contributed to conceptual framework. DB is the Principal Investigator who conducted the field research and transcribed and translated the interviews. DB wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Both GM and IP contributed significantly through advice, critiques, and editing. All authors approved the submitted manuscript.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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