

## TRANSCRIPT

### *Land Body Ecologies Podcast*

### Episode 6 – The Land Has Changed For Them Too

#### English Translation

*Sounds of the landscape; car horns, birds, water and insects*

**(English Translation – Anush):** So, so she was saying that when she was very young then the forest was close by. The forest was very thick and close by. There were many animals around. There were animals, there were bears. They were very different kinds of birds, elephants, and, yeah. And she's saying that there were many times where the bears used to come very close to their house. And it was, it wasn't a bad thing. She was saying that the one thing that was that she reminds that struck her about bears was a feet are very similar to our feet, saying she saw that, and she's like, so she kept saying that the feet is, the feet were the same, the feet were the same. And you're saying that with the elephants, we didn't have any problem with them. It was fine. They started coming here because the forest department let them come. They said, since the forest was very thick over here, and they had lots of food here. So she's saying we didn't have any problems, but after 7pm, we had to start just being aware of the fact that there might be elephants around. But the elephants didn't mean them any harm.

**FADE TO SCAPE ----- (5mins)**

**Vishala:** I'm kind of a modern settler here. I moved in here 12 years ago, and not

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fully, again, I'm still between the city and here, but yes, my connection actually started with the Bannerghatta Zoo. When I was in school. I liked the zoo, and I always thought beyond the zoo, the world is just forest, and I didn't even think of people living here at that point in time. So the fascination was more the zoo and the forest and the fact that the elephants lived in this forest and all this so close to Bangalore, just 25 kilometers from Bangalore. You had heard about stories of herds of elephants, not just stories. We have seen herds of elephants walking here and then the zoo. So I've always wanted to live in this part of the place.

So here in the ecologically sensitive zone, we have a mix of tribals and settlers. In fact, very few of the tribes left. We have had more settlers, also because of lands getting fragmented around the rest of the villages, what we call revenue villages, villages which generate agricultural income are called revenue villages, according to the regulations. So once families started becoming smaller, nuclear families were forming and there was fragmentation of land, and agriculture didn't make sense in very small plots of land, so people started moving closer to the forest. And so that is why we have a lot of settlers in the ecologically sensitive zone. So they are all mostly people from communities which are called Okkaligas. They are farmers. So okaliga, again, has this various subset of people in it, but Okkaligas are the farming community. So most of them who are farmers, moved in here and cleared little plots of land so that they could settle down, basically with their cows, with their livestock, whatever livestock, and then also grow a little bit of food for themselves. So the idea was more sustenance farming. This is, again, I'm talking about the 1960s, and probably the 50s, 60s and the 70s. The settling down has happened till close to the 70s. Only till the forest Regulation Act could even stop all the settling activities. So you will find a mix of these communities. And at some point we have also heard about the herder community, which is the cow herd community, being present here. Of course, we have, we see very few of them now. And also there was a small weavers community who are called Devanga in Karnataka. Yeah, I think roughly, these are the large communities, and the couple of tribes that we are aware of are the Iruligas and Lambanis, again, are not maybe tribes, but the nomadic tribe were not really dependent on forests, but it's an interesting tribe.

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**Nishant:** I'm Nishant. I study elephants, and mostly elephant behavior, and I fell in love with elephants from when I was a kid. That's mostly because I grew up in Mysore, and Mysore was not far from some of the best protected areas in Karnataka, like Nagarhole and Bandipur. And I think my parents, every holiday, they would take me to these parks because it was close by. And every time we went there, we would see large herds of elephants in groups, sometimes solitary, and it always sort of, I was curious to know why they were in these groups or a solitary although they were not humans, they were doing a lot of things that humans would do, which is, socialize, greet each other, call for one another, and all of that.

I study elephants, not very far from the city of Bangalore, maybe about 20 to 30 kilometers south of Bangalore is where you will start finding wild elephants. This is a very interesting landscape, and an area starts with the Bannerghatta National Park to the northeast of this landscape, and continues further south to form what is one of the largest habitats, contiguous habitats available for wild Asian elephants in the world.

Bannaerghatta, due to its rainfall and its occurrence towards the northeast of this range has largely rocky outcrops, has scrub woodland, dry top forest and has some grassland patches too. But further south, it opens up into this large savanna type, grasslands, large areas of grasslands with short trees, and then further moving south as the rainfall increases, you move into deciduous habitat and then even into evergreen forests. Which basically tells us that elephants can actually live in very diverse habitats and thrive. An Asian elephant herd would require something like 600 to 700 square kilometers to range in. And if you just take the administrative boundary of Bannerghatta itself, it's only about 250 square kilometers, which basically means that elephants range beyond the administrative boundary of this particular National Park. So the geographical area itself is in the Dharwar Craton, and it forms a part of that rocky outcrops that you continue to see close to Bangalore City as well.

*Thimmarayappa speaking in Kannada*

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## (English Translation – Kishore)

**Thimmarayappa:** There are elephants, bison, leopards, peacocks, and deer in the forests. Iruligas say that an elephant needs 70-80 kgs of food each day. They travel 10-15 kms as a herd in the night, Tamil Nadu border is very close from this place, they travel in the same path that their ancestors did, they know the exact crop and the harvest time and come only at that time. Their nostrils are very powerful and can pick up scents quickly, they know where the stock is kept and ransack the place. We don't mind if they just eat and leave, the problem is the damage that they cause, other animals don't eat much. Elephants come as a herd and destroy the fields.

But these people don't chase them away, they say that the forest belongs to the elephant and not humans. They protect the forest and the animals, only this community does that, nobody else does it.

**Nishant:** So Bannerghatta is unique in that sense, because it's very close to an urban center like Bangalore, which basically means that it's also going to drive a lot of the changes, social cultural changes among the people in the landscape.

So it's very true what Thimmarayappa and others say, because initially, and when they used to see the elephants come to either the crop fields or in the forest, because a lot of people would take their cattle grazing in the forest. In fact, before it was declared as a national park, some of the villages were inside the park.

So interactions with the elephants used to happen at a very close quarter. And so if they saw an elephant, they would watch it. They would like to see what it was doing. Understand what it meant to be living with elephants. And even then, you would have people you know adjusting their lifestyles in response to the animal movement in the area. And elephants do the same. Actually, they respond to what people are doing and modify their own lifestyles to adjust and be in the same space. So what we usually end up calling, as you know, they are spatially in the same area, but temporarily they are separated. They're all there, but they use the same water body at different points in time. Villages would use it during the day and elephants would use it at night, but it's the same water body. These were the shared spaces, but now,

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when a lot of people are not there, and you have a new set of elephants, the same elephants, but who have learnt through their interactions with people or with vehicles or with wires, and the electricity power lines, let's say trains, all of these that have come into their lives as well. The elephants may also be wary of how to respond and react, because it's not the same anymore.

**Thimmarayappa:** So, I was an 18 or say 20-year-old youth. At that time, HAL runway was being constructed. So, our people would say that there are demons who would come from America and work, my grandfather would pack up food and gather all the people including women to go and see the works. Seeing the bull dozers make so much noise and commotion, the women would scream in fear thinking that they are devils. They had never seen it and neither had we, it was not there anywhere around us. Not even in Bangalore.

**Vishala:** I think one of the biggest challenge here, I don't know if people are perceiving it, but it does affect them, Is the changes in the land, the idea of the forest, deemed forest or an ecologically sensitive zone, or an elephant corridor, because there are these, are changing terminologies or changing visions, which are not necessarily coming from people. So it is coming very top down, or from a set of people who think that this is important. So I personally think, and being here, also being a resident of this place, I also feel that understanding the needs of the people and these classifications coming in a very sensible way from people is important. So I personally think that's one of the biggest challenges here. But people living here work around it, because it can get very difficult for them to deal with the forest department or anybody who's coming from the revenue department, which suddenly says that, okay, no, this is what this land is. And again, human elephant conflict is definitely a psychological burden on people practicing agriculture. So one of the reasons I think that most people stick to sericulture as much as they may not be able to voice it, but the fact that sericulture is so comfortable for them is that elephants don't eat the mulberry plants, or they don't even damage them significantly. So it's kind of an easier or a better or an economically also a viable option for the farmers to stick to it.

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So sustenance farming, or growing their own food, is reducing by the years. Every year we see that a few farmers are at least giving up growing ragi. One is, of course, the elephant, the fear that the elephant may raid them or eat the crop.

**Thimmarayappa:** These are silkworms. He gets them by their eggs. He buys a kilo of eggs. Then he feeds mulberry to the worms. They grow around here only. When they reach a certain age of majority they start making the cocoon. They have this cocoon and they take it to the big silk market where the cocoons are sold.

The mulberry could grow to become a big tree. But all the mulberry you could see around here would be cut to shrub level. That is how they keep it growing for multiple cycles for many years of silkworm feeding.

### *Singing and sounds of cooking*

**Vishala:** So ragi has been the staple grain for people around Bangalore, peri-urban Bangalore, for as long as we can imagine. So because this is not a place where rice grows. It's been this dry land, plane lands for long. So ragi and rain fed, ragi has always been something that has yielded in bounty, also for people low on labor and very, very nutritious. The nutritional content of ragi, or what's called finger millet in English, is quite high. So that's been their staple forever. And one very nice thing about ragi is it still stays in the diet of most people, at least one meal. It's still there in most people, not just in the villages, but also in the city. Most people who come to work to the city still look for a one meal of ragi because that's still part of their DNA, and they need it for their nourishment. In terms of agriculture or farming for ragi, there is people, of course, the settling communities, who came from other villages, got their own seeds, their own ragi seeds, and then settle down in these places. But eventually, over a period of time, because ragi seeds tend to evolve, more seeds evolve for the conditions of the place. So they say that there are no new variants which have been developed by farmers in the last 10 years. So that's it's almost like breeding, evolutionary breeding among the farming community is

completely come to a standstill because farmers have preferred to buy these hybrid seeds. And also, I think one of the promises of these hybrid seeds has been a lower duration crop, while most traditional seeds take five and half, five to five and a half months to completely mature and be ready for harvest. Most of these hybrids are done in three months. And what happens is, it is not that farmers need this in three months, but then, once the duration is shortened, the exposure to climate variances, or these uncertainties in rainfall or any other uncertainty is reduced. Reduced time means reduced exposure to risk. So I guess I think that has been one selling point. And here again, because people are worried about the elephants. And then, of course, rainfall patterns have always been erratic, still a little erratic, so people find it easier to just go for the three month hybrid variety, so that they're just finishing off their ragi growing season quickly.

So I think there are pros and cons. As much as we all want the native varieties to come back and we want, we want to even explore the possibilities of evolutionary breathing so that there are, I mean, it is part of the climate change narrative also that it's important to keep the native seeds on the land growing, because native seeds have the ability to grow their resilience over climate change, over changes in soil and over even changes in people's attitudes.

*Thimmarayappa speaking in Kannada*

### **(English Translation – Kishore)**

**Thimmarayappa:** My mother had 12 children and did so much hard work. Now no one goes to the fields. No one uses firewood for cooking. Things have gotten easier with a gas stove, and in minutes, food is ready. That is why BP, diabetes has all increased. We were not even aware as to what all these ailments were. We do not know what was coffee or upma, really, we were not aware of these things while we grew up. The dish, Pongal was known when the Vishnumaya Swami Ji ashram prepared and served it to us. We only knew about rotis and balls made from finger millet. There was another kind of rice available called *dodh-bere-nalu* [in Kannada] and if we had it along with buttermilk or curds, we would never fall sick. Now there

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is something called sona masuri and other varieties, there is no essence or goodness in that.

Whatever happens the old way of life has to come back, and all the spraying of medicines and all of that has to stop. If not now, sometime in future it will happen. Maybe another 100 odd years are needed, that is when they will learn. They need to falter and fail only then will they learn.

**Nishant:** And so now, when they look at people, they may have many memories that they'll be carrying with them, and accordingly respond. And very often it may not be, as calm and quiet and peaceful as it used to be, let's say, 50, 60, years ago. Now, elephants have learned that if I see a certain person or hear a certain sound, then it means that it's either a cracker or maybe even a gunshot, and I need to respond in a certain way. And people, of course, have picked that up too, so they might be finding it really scary to actually be close to an elephant when it's either close to the village or actually walking through the village, on the village door, let's say, or in their crop fields. Because the moment they see the elephant in the crop field they try to show it away, for obvious reasons that it's going to damage the crops. But the elephants now may respond very aggressively and not just move away, because, over time they have habituated their condition to what people are doing, and they think they need to shoot people away and feed on the crops. So, the negative interactions that we see today – and I'm not saying all of it is negative, there are lots of positive interactions and neutral interactions that we see – but a lot of the negative interactions we see is also dependent on how people have treated and interacted with the elephant, and that's what we end up seeing today. And you will see that in the responses that, let's say Tim Raju has, or any other person from the landscape would have, and they would say the elephants have changed too. And it's, it's a very, it's very powerful statement actually, because that's a clear acceptance that our interactions with the animal has changed, and the animal is responding to what we've been doing as well.



**Thimmarayappa:** I would like to reiterate something important, that if there are forests surviving today, it is because of these people.

**R:** The Irruligas?

**Thimmarayappa:** Yes, the forests survived because of these people, and the locals like us are the ones who are now spoiling it.

It could be people like you, me, or the prominent people in the villages, MLA's, ministers, it could be any of these people, but no one from the community. Even if they had to chop down a tree, it would be a very thought-out decision. Also, if they had to cut greens, it would be only top parts, not the roots. If they had to dig a root vegetable, they would not remove it completely from the roots because they would say it needs to be there for the coming year

**Nishant:** A lot of people come to this city for work, and then they go back to their villages at night. Sometimes they have out migrated entirely. And then now the younger generations are living in the city predominantly, and would only go visit their parents or grandparents occasionally, maybe over the weekends, or maybe a few times in a month, or maybe few times in a year. What that basically means is that your basic connect with the land itself, is, slowly, dwindling, and it's, you know, it's erasing.

**Thimmarayappa:** But now, what has happened is, that there is control over the forests which was not there earlier. So, they would use sandalwood and then what happened was, everyone understood the value of sandalwood and made it a business and completely destroyed it along with other valuable trees. Even when the forest officials tried to control it, it was not possible. Then the government started granting them 2 acres of land each. Then things started easing out when wherever these people stayed, there were boundaries that were set up and sheets

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were placed over their huts, which made it more habitable for them. Some of them started giving their children education, after the ashram came into existence. After Ramakrishna Ashrama came, things really brightened up here. So later the Swamijiis would visit every village and give clothes and basic essentials to people and also at times give food to them, so all these kinds of benefits were provided.

Now what happened is that, after the Ashrama was set up, they asked everyone to get some education. Before the Wipro Vice Chairman got land for their company, there were prominent people who came and completely destroyed the forests by cutting down trees. We all got paid as daily wages, but they transported all trees to Bangalore and ruined the entire forest. Now when all of them have come here, they are in control.

*Thimmarayappa speaking in Kannada*

**Thimmarayappa:** Earlier, they had a free rein of the forests, now they are being curtailed. They could live and go anywhere they wanted to in the forests, but now they cannot. There are so many rules and forest officials and guards are everywhere. So these officials and guards think that all people are there to steal and rob something from the forests, even if it is something very small and minor. This is what has happened. And another thing is, that these people who have corrupted these people are the educated ones. You might get offended by my statement.

May I continue?

Earlier, why was it like there were no police, cases, or jail-term for all these people? But now, why is it that every village has people who have cases against them, one or the other case against them? Why is it so? Please tell me.

**Vishala:** The idea of development, has not been inclusive, like for example, yes, there is a school. There has been fairly good access to education for most of them, but in terms of quality and what has it done for people in this last 30-40 years? It's

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still, there's still a lot to reconsider and debate on. Have we given people the kind of education that's required? Like one of the reservations I have is, I still feel one of the schools should have been a tribal school, where they are still learning that practices, their cultural practices, and are also connected to the modern education system, and they understand, how to balance it. So that those components still missing. And I think that that does impact the children. So when they are learning concepts and things which are alien to them, which is not in their immediate surrounding, when they're, especially when they are young, and then when their cognitive skills are very, very strong. That's something that I feel is missing in a place like this. I wish there were forest schools. I, I've heard of such forest school where kids spend most of their younger years connecting to, their first to their land and their ecosystem, and then they get oriented to the modern education system, and then they learn about the outside world. But here, this education system, from day one, takes them to the outside world, and they're...

**Babitha:** Maybe it would be good if we got the women, if you could tell them a little bit about the, the intent behind the women's bakery and like why you thought that was important.

**Vishala:** And with women, particularly, ummm, I think it's very, very challenging in our country. They are still not comfortable voicing their feelings and voicing their needs and talking about it, even discussing, because even within the Federation, one of the clauses when we, we actually co created the objects of this federation, we kept re-emphasizing that the economic empowerment is one of it. You doing the business of bakery is one of it. But there are few other elements of you coming together which are important. So one of it is also, one of it includes self-governance and talking about our comments and discussing on how women would like to be part of it. And another one is also about getting comfortable talking to each other about their own needs, and it could be anything. It could be personal needs, it could be things that they want to say, they want to do. It's still very, very challenging. We are also seeking certain experts who could probably moderate such things for them and get them to talk, because everything is normalized. Domestic violence is

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normalized, yeah, umm, even incidents like a woman getting completely frustrated with the situation at home and domestic violence and, you know, consuming something which is pesticide or something, and then going to the hospital and coming back, everything is normalized here. So they just take it on their side and just move on. But, we can see it. I think if somebody is observant and, and others also feel it. Sometimes, when I, when we discuss, we just ask, okay, it's been a month, and why is she still not, not able to participate in something. Then they say, I have this, something like this happened last month, so she's feeling bad about it. So it stops at that. But then the expectation is that they recover out, out of from their bad feeling or their sad feeling as soon as possible, and just get back to work. So that those support systems are still not there. Like, again when we were talking about singing, we know that when you, when we hear, especially the words, the lyrics of some of the songs that the women sing, is a lot like the women are just sitting together and bitching about somebody who trouble them. It could be the mother-in-law, it could be the sister-in-law. So some of the songs are actually that, but some of the songs are very, very interesting. Yeah, it's about and it's some of the songs are about their desires also. I think people, older people, were more interesting to be writing lyrics like that and coining words like that and actually pouring out their thoughts and feelings through songs. But again, that's missing in the younger women. The younger women are not writing or not saying something that they want to say. So I, so we are also trying to get those same songs again, maybe just just repeat them and see if they can relate to it, still quite a challenge, because everything is normalized, including their gradually, their pains are normalized.

*Singing*

*Woman speaking*

**Anush:** So she, she remembers four instances very clearly, and all four instances are of elephants attacking people. So the first one she remembers was how an elephant

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caught someone with its trunk and just threw him away. The second when the second time was when someone was making, was cooking, ragi, and then he was, he was trampled, and then the third time, was another case of someone being thrown but the. Both the fourth case was someone who was trampled, but then the elephant covered everything with leaves and trees and everything to make it seem very normal, and then just went its way.

**Thimmarayappa:** People have been got out of forest by giving them 2 acres of land. What are they supposed to do with it? Nothing, apart from the rains and growing some crops. Nothing else can be done. If it rains well, then they can grow crops and even if they do there are other problems. There are elephants and it completely destroys the fields. They say that would be compensated. So, for the 20 sacks of grains they have lost due to the attack by elephants, they get 2 sacks worth of grain, that is hardly enough. It is very difficult to pursue agriculture in today's times. To cultivate something in 1 acre of land, it would cost anything between Rs.15,000 to 20,000. The process from plowing, weeding, planting seeds, irrigating, and bringing the grain to home. What one gets, is the same as what one has invested. There is no other profit, and if these animals ruin the crops, then there is absolutely nothing remaining for the people.

We try to grow whatever crops we can and try to eke out a living. The problem with the elephants began with the Forest department. Now in the Bannerghatta National Park, they say there are many acres of land, that is fine. But what they do is divide these forest lands, like Anekal Forest area, Bannerghatta Forest area, Harohalli Forest area etc. So, if any elephant from Harohalli Forest area were to venture out, then the farmers would protest and they ask them to take down these elephants, as all the crops and banana plantations are getting destroyed. So these people shoot down these elephants with small pellets and scare and injure them. So now, these elephants are scared of people and if people venture into forests, they attack them. Now what is happening is that they are chasing these elephants from one forest to another. People from Karnataka chase it towards the neighboring Tamil Nadu State, and they from there to here. What can the poor animals do?

The forest officials must not harm them. The government has a lot of money and so necessary steps can be taken, and beyond that, the farmers can look out. But the animals should also stay, and so must we. And we are all interdependent on one another, and that is how it should be. Instead of finding a solution, if the elephants or other animals are turned from one forest to another, and then from one state to another, how are they even supposed to survive? There is no place for them to inhabit, and how would they survive?

**Nishant:** So elephants are revered, in the whole of Southeast Asia, and we are very thankful to that actually, because when elephants, if we say today, occur in 13 Asian elephant range countries, in all of those range countries, they also revere elephants for various reasons, in one form or the other.

The cultural association that we have've had with elephants, like I said, goes back to ages right, of Lord Ganesha, and the story of how, Ganesha came about, and most of it, very interestingly, and with new literature and new work that's happening, in this cultural sphere of how elephants are culturally associated with humans, we're getting to know that also, people would probably were probably praying to elephants, to Ganesha, to not destroy the crops, because the farm season is up and one elephant moving through a crop field could potentially damage a lot of the crop that is being grown. So prayers, would be then, you know, offered hoping and praying that the elephants will not come and damage the crops, or we'll have a good harvest. So the elephants are used in festivals today. Elephants have been used in timber logging in the past, in some countries where Asian elephants occur, even today, elephants are used for timber logging. So there's been a very close physical association that people, largely in Asia, have had with the Asian elephants. You don't see that very much with, let's say, the African elephants, where such close physical proximity and contact, on a regular basis can be seen. So, this in some sense, moves from the elephant in the forest to elephants in your city, where, people seem to have understood that this close association is something that they have to live with.

I've been a watcher for a long time. I am when I joined, I was just a watcher, and then few years later, I got a permanent job here. After becoming permanent, my main job was to keep an eye out for elephants in the forest. See where they come

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from, where they go, keep an eye on the farmers lands for elephants. Chase the elephants away and make rounds in the forest. If the elephants went near people's homes, we would keep watch overnight, then we might hear that an elephant was seen somewhere else. It might be in the area for seven or eight days, so we had to stay around and protect the farmers lands. Now, the first time I saw an elephant. This was not even a national park, yet. I saw two elephants. Then, back then I was a pastoralist and used to bring my animals to the forest to graze. Then we heard that the government was putting up some iron structures here. This was the beginning of the National Park. After this, the comings and goings of elephants increased a lot. The elephant sightings were fewer before.

**(English Translation – Romit, Rohan)**

**Basappa:** I've been a watcher for a long time. I am Basappa. When I joined, I was just a watcher, and then few years later, I got a permanent job here. After becoming permanent, my main job was to keep an eye out for elephants in the forest. See where they come from, where they go, keep an eye on the farmers lands for elephants. Chase the elephants away, and make rounds in the forest. If the elephants went near people's homes, we would keep watch overnight, then we might hear that an elephant was seen somewhere else. It might be in the area for seven or eight days, so we had to stay around and protect the farmers lands.

The first time I saw an elephant, this was not even a national park yet. I saw 2 elephants then. Back then I was a pastoralist, and used to bring my animals to the forest to graze. Then we heard that the government was putting up some iron structures here. This was the beginning of the national park. After this, the comings and goings of elephants increased a lot. The elephant sightings were fewer before.

**Anush:** Oh, did you feel fear when you first came across an elephant?

**Basappa:** No no, I was not afraid of it.

**Anush:** Then?

**Basappa:** No, not fear. I was very happy seeing the elephant.

**Shrikanth:** The first time I saw an elephant was in the zoo when I was in college, Mysore Zoo and Bannerghatta Zoo. That was the first time I saw an elephant. There is such a difference when you see an elephant in captivity versus when you see it out here in the wild, you know. In their body language and in their health, you can see elephants here they look tremendous in their body language, they're so different, because of natural food mainly. Like Basappa said before, at night, the elephants can roam more freely and eat their favorite food, which is usually growing on farmer's land, like ragi and coconut. In zoos the food is limited and controlled. The first time I came here and saw the elephants in the wild, I thought, 'Wow, can elephants really be this big?'

But when I saw it, I did feel fear. Mainly because of its size. It was so different from zoo elephants. But yes, the first feeling I had was fear.

**Anush:** What challenges do you think the elephants have over here?

**Basappa:** What problems can the elephant have? The forest has trees, plants and greens. It gets food here. If that wasn't enough, they also take food from the farmers. We've made these solar fences, and barriers, but they escape them, break them, and go into the farmer's land.



They go into the farmer's land and eat their produce. The farmers get agitated and call us and say, “What Basappa, you’re elephants have destroyed our farms.”

**Srikanth:** No no, that is not what he is asking Basappa. He’s asking what problems elephants have. What problems do they have because of us?

**Basappa:** From us? No. We don't trouble them.

**Srikanth-** No, no, but what problems do *they* have?

**Basappa-** I am not sure i understand. I don't know sir.

**Srikanth:** I did not know about this before, only after I joined did I realized. Back then, there wasn't this much encroachment in the forest. Now, because of forest clearing and development activities, the space available for the elephants to roam has shrunk a lot. In many ways, they’ve lost a lot of their freedom to move around. In Basappa’s time, there were hundreds of elephants is what I’ve heard. Back then, if an elephant needed to be chased away, it would return after a month or more. Now, the same elephant we chase away, returns in a week. Why? Because it has nowhere to go. There is no more space for it, because of all the things *we* are doing, so it has no option but to return back here. Like it was in the zoo, it feels like their freedom here has become so restricted that they have nowhere to go.

Their favorite food - greens, bamboos, have all diminished, so they need to come out to the farmer’s land to eat. I think elephants could feel like they’ve missed a meal, like how we do because there is nothing much to eat. I feel they like are going hungry. Water, ponds, small dams, all these things are almost empty, and they must also be thirsty. It’s not like before, when lakes and ponds were filled with water for them to drink. That is what I think.

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**Nishant:** The basic, and the most important aspect that has changed in the area is the land use itself. So if you look at it from an elephant's perspective, an elephant's point of view, an elephant who was born in the 1940s will still be alive today. They'll be grandmothers, mostly. So the memory that they would have had, is that of, ranging in larger areas, what is today been converted from largely a forested area to, let's say, a crop field, or even a built up area. So the idea that the elephant had of its space, the, the lived space of an elephant born in 1940 is very different from its lived space today. So, the, so the young ones who are born into a herd will follow the elders, the grandmother and the aunts and the mother, in areas where they would range right? And the grandmothers would go to areas where they used to range. So they can only look at it as change from one forage to another. What was natural forage, is today a highly nutritious crop that is being grown by somebody which they don't necessarily understand, but it is still forage for them. So one type of forage they used to get in the 50s, in 2000s they are getting a different type of forage. That's what they are thinking, looking at it as. And the young ones are growing in this area, are also thinking that these areas, the human use areas, are part of their foraging areas, and there's nothing wrong in actually going and foraging in these areas, because, my grandmother is going, my aunt is going.

Now what has changed, and the amount of changes that have happened, clearing of forests, let's say, or vehicles coming in, and all of these, so that has, is the real change that the elephants are seeing. So today, their organic space, a space which we call as something that they can see, hear, touch, smell, taste, that organic space, is not only filled with smells of other animals or livestock and trees and other water and other things. It also has a lot of vehicles. It has people, it has various other things. Smells of crops that have come up and all of that. And so the organic space has changed. So, for an elephant who's living today in that organic space, its imagined space is still in the 40s and 50s where the forest was. And I think the conflict for an elephant is really coming between its current organic space and its imagined space, which is today's lived space. Ah, and it's very similar to humans I would think, because somebody who has gone through a lot over a long period of time and has memories of it, and that has changed completely today. My organic space is in conflict with my imagined space, and that conflict is my current lived

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space. And I don't think it's very different for the elephants at all. So when we, whenever even I think of conflict between humans and elephants, I really think it's in the mind, because the space that we live in has changed or altered completely.

**Srikanth:** How do I talk about the relationship between man and elephant? I think in the olden days, people would treat elephants like they would treat God. Now the “new-age tech people” don't see them with the same reverence. Back then, if an elephant damaged 10% of a farmer's plot, they would say, “Aa, it's okay”, and continue to farm in the remaining 90%. Now, because the farmers themselves don't even have 10% of the land to grow their crops in, they cannot afford to have elephants coming to ruin their livelihood. They feel his loss so much more, these farmers.

What Basappa said earlier, that elephants have become more now, I think that elephants were there then, they are here now also. The only difference is they don't have space anymore. That's why people are seeing them more often. There is another issue here. Elephants have great memory. This land, this forest was theirs. It is their corridor, and they would roam freely. Now with people coming and building these things, they claim the land for themselves. But whose land is it? Is it the elephant's land that people have taken? Or is it the people's land that elephants are destroying?

We all want elephants, don't we? We want them because it's a thrill to see them. We want them, because we need elephants for cultural and religious programs.

But if we see an elephant in the wild, people won't accept it.

**Nishant:** Many elephants have taught me different things. To think of one, you know, we've had elephants who, have shown a lot of, empathy I would say, towards other elephants. And I remember in one situation where it was a, high conflict area, and, they were older bulls and they were younger bulls. And every time people were very close to the elephants, the older bulls would actually protect the younger ones. They would come in front, and put the younger ones away from the people, and

take them along, to areas that were safer. So just look at that relationship. Is basically telling me that elephants do avoid conflict. They do not want to be in conflict. If left alone, they would like to do their own thing. And by doing that, they are also building strong social bonds with one another, because the younger one is looking after the older elephant, and thinking that there is someone to actually protect me as well, and that I'll not be, you know, exposed to harm right away. And what they do is follow these older bulls, into non-conflict areas, or rather, I would say they diffuse conflict in some sense. Very often what happens is, we, tend to remove older elephants because they just look larger, and they, because of conditioning, they habituated to people so they don't respond by running away all the time. When we've had elephants like that. Hiristor is one such elephant, who was so used to being around people, that people felt that he had lost, ah, fear, and that was something that did not go in favor of him being in that landscape. So you would want an elephant to immediately move away. But what very often we don't understand, is that if an elephant starts running, it can potentially cause more damage than an elephant who is walking, calm, collected manner, and is moving away from conflict. So removing such older bulls from an area has dire consequences to the other individuals, younger individuals especially, but also for people, because you're then left with no older elephant to teach a younger elephant to be calm, in a conflict situation. So young elephants tend to respond aggressively, because they're scared. They're fearful, of what people are doing, and they're also inexperienced. They don't know what to do. But if a Hiristor was around, you would have an elephant who would learn to be calm and respond to a situation appropriately. So I think that relationship that Hiristor had with a number of bulls in that area, had had a profound influence on my life. And I've tried to tell this story to many people, so that they understand the importance of a large pool, in an area and it's not just that larger the elephant, the more damage it causes. Never is the case. In fact, it was doing the job of, let's say, 50-60 forest department officials who were trying to move the elephant out of the area.

**Srikanth:** People from older generation are good! They know the feel. They would say, “So sad, there is no water in the lake. Let the elephants drink our water.” Do you understand? Another example, earlier elephants would come and eat some leaves

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from the trees and back then people would be happy and excitedly tell others, “An elephant ate from our tree”. Now people mostly complain, saying, “An elephant ate from the tree we planted with so much effort, and now it's destroyed”. That's the difference between older generations and this one.

When elephants travel outside, we need to chase them away, usually because it is the night when they come out. Their eyes are very sharp, and we need to use torches. They can tell where there are pits and traps, that's their ability. They have these special qualities. Recently, there was an elephant in a banana grove. We had to chase it away to another forest using crackers. They run away in ways that we can't follow.

You maybe see it as risky, but it is very common for us. We live among them, no?

**Nishant:** Elephants are, ah, very, superior when it comes to cognition. And we know very clearly, that they have a mental map of, the land, in which they roam. And they need to constantly update this mental map. And, so anything that changes in that landscape or in the range that they roam in, they need to keep themselves updated with it, because only then can they navigate that space. And their navigation is really driven either by availability of resources or threats. And elephants we also know are social beings, so they are going to pass that memory on, or that learning, from one elephant to the other. So the other younger elephants, are going to pick that up. So it's transferred, or it's moved on across generations. So that memory is going to stay. And any change that has happened in that, is going to be recorded, and it's going to be used as an adaptive behavior, where a certain response is going to come in. And sometimes extreme adaptations, in places where there are no forests, and now they are completely cropped fields or human-use areas. Elephants seem to scout for large water bodies, and they go and stay in those water bodies, because that's the only place of refugia that they find, in a sea of human beings, let's say. But that adaptability is coming from the idea that a space like this, a water which we drink and bathe in, cannot just provide us with that water that we need to quench our thirst, but is also a place of refugia, that we can actually go and take shelter there, and we are safer than most other places around.

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So they're constantly mapping these changes, and they're adapting very quickly to such changes. So the current, lived space that the elephants are in, and where I think the conflict is, is really that change, right? Because we are all trying to grapple with what's happening with the uncertainties around us, which is either brought through climate change, ah mostly, but what we see today is not some gradual change that is happening, but very erratic weather events, very heavy rainfall in very short periods of time, followed by prolonged periods of drought. We've never had that, but that's something that we're seeing. And farmers would like to respond to that, because the cropping patterns have to change completely, because it's uncertain when the rains are going to come and when the crops are going to be ready, and at that time, if the rain comes, then, the crops are also going to be ruined. Elephants too, are responding to these erratic weather events, sometimes by showing large, extended movements, what we call as dispersers, sometimes missing out or mistiming their arrival into certain areas because they are hoping and from their memory that they know that there will be some forage available during this period of time, but when they come to that place, it's not there. So solastalgia is extremely real for non-humans as well.

**(English translation – Kishore)**

**Thimmarayappa:** There is another thing. We are living here, but the land belongs to them. The land belongs to these animals who have been there from times immemorial. Now, we have taken their place. So where should they go? And also they need to survive. The land belongs to the animals and the forest. And if we were to take over their land. How is it right? And which God would accept this injustice and forgive us? We are living where they should live, and all of us must live in harmony.

**Nishant:** It's something that they have to grapple with, largely driven by an anthropogenic era that we are living in, and the change that has been brought about by us humans. But we see that very quickly, in a species like elephant. Also, to just touch upon the point of climate change, we are now seeing elephants moving

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higher up in altitude. So, we are seeing elephants in Cunnur, we are seeing elephants in Kodaikanal, we are seeing elephants in Idukki. A lot of the elephants are moving up. So why are they doing that? Are they able to track certain moisture in the habitat and hence move up. Are the first ones who are coming there actually scouts and will be followed by more elephants later? None of these we know, fully yet, but I think they are giving us enough signs and cues, to say that something is changing in habitat, and they are able to use their adaptive behaviors, to respond to that. To that the landscape has changed for them too.

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