Research Article

The Vanishing Art of Capturing and Taming Wild Elephants among the Khamti Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh: An Overview Through Oral Tradition

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Abstract: Human–animal relationships have profoundly shaped the evolution of civilizations, influencing economic activities, religion, warfare, transportation, and social life. These contributions were possible only because humans mastered the art of capturing and taming wild animals. However, modern generations often overlook this legacy as machines replace many traditional animal roles. Without understanding the historical importance of animals, we risk undervaluing the foundations laid by our ancestors. In this context, the present study adopts an exploratory and descriptive approach to examine the traditional techniques of capturing and taming elephants practiced by the Khamti tribe of Arunachal Pradesh.

Key words: Human civilization, animals, art of capturing and taming, khamti tribe, elephant.

1.   Introduction

When we revisit the history of any civilization, the contribution of animals in shaping its growth and prosperity cannot be overlooked. From the earliest stages of human development until barely two centuries ago, animals were among the most valued resources for human societies. Across cultures and eras, the possession of certain animals symbolized wealth, prestige, and strength within communities. Their role in human society was central, influencing the progress of civilizations in multiple ways. Therefore, evidence of this deep human–animal relationship is found in oral traditions, folktales, and myths of tribal societies, as well as in the ancient texts of major civilizations. There are innumerable monumental remains, archaeological findings—such as coins bearing animal motifs—and the widespread use of animal emblems by rulers further testify to the significance of animals in human history (Schlien, p.18, 1990).

Many studies suggested that the process of hunting of animals by humans began with the evolution of mankind in the Paleolithic age, and the domestication/taming of certain species soon followed. Early domestication was driven by the need to secure food during crises and to enable barter with other communities. Over time, humans domesticated different animals for specific purposes like for consumption, protection, transport, and assistance in daily work, etc. (Wylie, p.165, 2008) Many of these species became integral members of human households, a relationship that continues even today among various communities around the world.

The domestication of animals such as donkeys, horses, and camels revolutionized the medium of transportation and made long-distance trade possible, serving as the fastest means of land travel until the advent of railways in the 19th century. Beyond trade, animals like horses and elephants played crucial roles in warfare, symbolizing power and military strength (Nossov & Dennis, p. 4, 2008). Thus, the history of human civilization is deeply intertwined with the history of animals, whose contributions cannot be overlooked.

This paper stems from my curiosity about how the Tai-Khamtis (henceforth Khamtis) of eastern Arunachal Pradesh despite living in different habitats, had succeeded in domesticating one of the largest and strongest land animal—elephants that seem almost impossible to hunt or restrain. Yet for hundreds of years, they have developed the art to capture, trained, and used the elephants for multiple needs.

The Khamtis of Arunachal Pradesh

The Khamtis are a Theravada Buddhist tribe settled in the lower region drained by the *Tengapani* and *Nao-Dihang* in the *Namsai* district of Arunachal Pradesh. The word Khamti means, a land full of gold (*kham*=gold: *Ti*=place). Their society is patriarchal in its nature, and they mostly live in nuclear families called as *Hong Huinleu*. Traditionally, they have a political organization called *Mokchup*, whose leader is known as *Chaofa*. Sedentary agriculture is the mainstay of their economic activities. They are among the few tribes of Arunachal Pradesh who have their own script known as *Lik Tai*, derived originally from the *Tai* language, and they maintain chronicles known as *Chyatuie*. They have their own law book called *Thamasat* (**For a comprehensive analysis of Khamti's social, political, and economic structures, see Choudhury** (1978).

Historically, their origin and migration are traced back to *Bor-Khamti* region near the *Irrawaddy's* source. They migrated in the present habitat by crossing the *Patkai* hills in the 18th century and were permitted by then Ahom ruler to settle along the *Tengapani* in 1751 AD. Later on, they expanded into the *Sadiya* tract during periods of political instability in Assam, eventually clashing with the British in a rebellion of (1839–1843) that led to their dispersal across Assam and Arunachal Pradesh (**For detail discussion on Khamti's migration and resistance movement, see** (Tani, 2019)).

When we revisit their history, over the years, especially after their contact with colonial and postcolonial administrations, the cultural and technological life has changed considerably. This paper examines these transformations through one of their most significant traditional practices of capturing and taming of wild elephants. The elephants occupy a central place in Khamti religion, mythology, economy, and social life, similar to the importance of *Bos Frontalis* in central Arunachal tribes and the *Yak* in the western Arunachal region communities **(For detail discussion on *Bos Frontalis*, see** (Tani, 2025)).

This paper investigates how the Khamti developed and practiced the techniques of capturing and taming elephants, detailing the traditional methods employed during hunts, the training processes, and the multiple roles elephants assumed within Khamti society. The study is based on the both primary and secondary sources within ethnographic and ethnohistorical frameworks, drawing on oral traditions, myths, folklore, and field-based data. The paper is structured into three sections: the first addresses the origin of elephants as narrated in Khamti oral tradition; the second examines the cultural and technical practices of elephant capture and taming; and the third explores the socio-economic and religious significance of elephants in Khamti society.

2.   Khamti Folk Tales on the Origin of the Elephant

The Khamti people share a profound historical and spiritual bond with the elephant, known in their language as *Chang Tsang*. In their worldview, elephants are not merely animals but sentient beings woven into the moral, economic, and cosmological fabric of life. The distinction between a domesticated elephant (*chang maan*) and a wild elephant (*chang thun*) is considered only surface-level (Namchoom, personal communication, 12th Jan., 2016). Both are sacred; both belong to an interconnected world in which humans, animals, and spirits continuously interact. Village elephants live under the care and companionship of humans, while forest elephants are guided and protected by the unseen guardians of the wilderness—the forest spirits. This dual guardianship highlights the Khamti belief that humans and spirits share an equal responsibility toward the wellbeing of all elephants.

Among the many narratives that express this reverence, the origin story of the first elephant, *Ailung*, holds a special place. According to their folklore, *Ailung's* journey from spirit-born child to the ancestor of all elephants begins with a humble human desire.

Long ago, there lived a married couple who yearned deeply for a child. Despite countless rituals, prayers, and offerings, their hopes remained unfulfilled. Their longing eventually drove them to seek help from a sacred tree, believed to be a dwelling place of powerful spirits. Each day, they walked to the tree, carrying clear water in small vessels. They poured it gently at the base of the trunk, whispering prayers into the bark, hoping that the spirit who lived within would hear their suffering.

Moved by their sincerity, the tree spirit finally revealed itself. It listened to their sorrow and assured them that their wish for a child would be granted. Comforted by the spirit's promise, the couple returned home with renewed faith. True to the blessing, the woman conceived shortly afterward.

After long months, she went into labor. But when the birth finally came, the couple found not a human infant cradled in their arms, but a small tortoise, with a smooth shell and bright, inquisitive eyes. Though startled, they did not reject the strange child. Instead, they embraced him with compassion and named him *Ailung*.

Ailung grew quickly, yet he was unlike any other child. He refused his mother's milk from the very first day and demanded rice instead. As time passed, his appetite became insatiable. The more he ate, the more food he seemed to need. Before long, the family's modest stores of grain dwindled. The couple, already poor, began to struggle under the burden of feeding him. One day, overwhelmed by desperation, they returned to the sacred tree to plead for guidance once more-but this time, the spirit remained silent.

That evening, *Ailung* overheard his mother lamenting that he had consumed all their food. Her voice trembled with worry, and for the first time, *Ailung* understood the hardship he had brought upon them. Filled with guilt and determination, he decided that he must find a way to ease their suffering.

The next morning, he approached his father and asked for a *dao*, a traditional blade used for cutting bamboo and clearing forest paths. Though puzzled by the unusual request, the father forged a *dao* and handed it to him. *Ailung* took the blade gently in his mouth and walked toward the forest.

As he stepped into the depths of the woods, a transformation overtook him. The small tortoise shell expanded and stretched; his limbs grew powerful and thick; his body swelled with immense strength. By the time he reached the heart of the forest, *Ailung* had transformed fully into an elephant—the very first of his kind. The *dao* he carried became elongated and hard, turning into the tusks that mark the elephant's grandeur. From that moment onward, *Ailung* lived in the wilderness. He became the ancestor of all wild elephants, and every elephant roaming the forests is believed to carry his lineage ((Namchoom, personal communication, 12th Jan., 2016) **and for more detail, see** (Gogoi, 1971)).

The tale of *Ailung* is more than a myth—it is a cultural truth that shapes the Khamti understanding of elephants. It reminds them that elephants are beings born from a union of human devotion, spiritual blessing, and forest mystery. Whether living among people or wandering deep in the forests, elephants are considered kin, linked to humans through a shared origin and protected by both earthly caretakers and spiritual guardians.

Ritual Expression Associated with Elephant Capturing: Guided by this belief, they follow strict rituals before any expedition to capture or tame a wild elephant. These ancient practices acknowledge the role of forest spirits and treat the act of capturing an elephant as a privilege, requiring rituals performed before, during, and

after every expedition. Before embarking on an elephant capturing expedition, they engage in meditation and perform rituals invoking natural and supernatural forces. In this context they strictly observe a ritual making offerings to a deity called *Phi Muang*, the guardian spirit of the forest who protects all creatures, and to *Chao Pling Chang*, a deity regarded as the celestial *mahout*[1] responsible for the well-being of forest elephants. These rites serve both as requests for permission and as assurances that the captured elephant will be cared for properly (Laine, p.78, 2012).

No elephant capture expedition can begin without first performing the ritual of propitiating the *phi muangs*. Within the expedition team, the chief *phāṅdi* (elephant trapper) assumes the primary responsibility for conducting the ritual. This involves offering a sacrificed animal to the spirits and ensuring that the *phi muangs* are properly nourished, symbolically representing the participation of the entire team, including the domestic elephants employed in the operation. The ritual reinforces both spiritual obedience and social cohesion, aligning human action with the natural and supernatural order of the forest **(For details on various ritual associated in elephant hunting, see** (Laine, 2020)**).** The ritual sacrifice is generally made on the day of departure. Only after completing these rituals can the actual process of capture and taming begin. These practices, though rooted in Buddhism, reflect a complex belief system that assigns spiritual guardianship to various flora and fauna and emphasizes disciplined, ethical interaction with the natural world. At its core, this worldview seeks to maintain harmony between humans and nature, making it a compelling subject for deeper research.

3.   Traditional Types and Methods of Capturing Elephants

The Khamti adopts three main traditional methods for capturing wild elephant:

1. *Kyone Method* (keddah)
2. *Kyaw Phan Method* (mela shikar/lassoing)
3. *Decoy Method* (female decoys)

Among these three methods, they largely adopted the *kyaw phan* method although both *kyone* and *decoy* are also used according to the demand of situation. I shall discuss all these three methods which has been used by them since ancient time.

The *Kyone* Method: The *kyone* method (*keddah*) is one of the principal techniques used by them to trap and tame wild elephants. This method involves constructing a large wooden stockade on firm, level ground along the elephants' habitual routes. The enclosure must appear natural and unobtrusive from both inside and outside. A continuous platform is built along the top of the walls to protect the workers during the capture.

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[1] *Mahout* is a person who trains, handles, and cares for elephants, especially domesticated or working elephants

Typically, circular and roughly the size of a tennis court, the stockade is built by first clearing a patch of forest. Stout wooden posts, 18–19 feet long, are sunk five feet into the ground at intervals of about three feet. Horizontal logs are then tightly fitted between the posts to create walls 13–14 feet high. The construction is extremely labour-intensive, requiring large quantities of timber to be hauled from distant areas so as not to disturb the elephants' forest habitat (Chow Moho Chowmoung, personal communication, 14th Jan., 2016).

The perimeter of the stockade is carefully concealed with leaves and branches, and, where possible, tied to nearby trees to make the structure appear natural. Gates are built at both ends of the path so that elephants can be driven in from either direction. However, skilled trapper often constructs the stockade across a secondary path instead, relying on their expertise to divert the herd from the main route. This reduces labour, as only a single gate is required.

The gates open inward. Before a drive begins, the entry gate is propped open with a long rope extending to a *machan* (watching platform) hidden in a nearby tree. At the right moment, the watcher cuts the rope, releasing the gate. It swings shut automatically and is further driven by a spring mechanism made from a bent sapling tied with a rope. Since mature male elephants are difficult to control and often refuse captivity, the Khamti generally avoid capturing matured elephant; therefore, the stockade need not be strong enough to restrain the largest elephants (Laine, p. 83, 2012).

Once the stockade is ready, the hunters wait for the herd to move along its usual route. The drive typically begins in late afternoon or evening, when elephants are already on the move and less suspicious of concealed structures. Elephants forced during the heat of the day tend to resist or circle back; after dark, they may become too aggressive to manage. The hunters use loud noises to separate the herd, then encircle the selected elephant with the help of trained elephants called *Koonki*[2] and guide it toward the stockade. As soon as it enters, the gate slams shut (Laine, 2012).

Pregnant females, very old elephants, and calves are intentionally allowed to escape. Inside the stockade, a shallow trench runs along the inner wall to discourage the animal from charging the structure. With the assistance of *koonki* elephants and skilled *shikaris*, the captured elephant is eventually noosed and led out for the taming process (Manpoong, personal communication, 16th January, 2016).

The *Kyaw Phan* Method: The *Kyaw Phan* method (*Mela Shikar*) is a traditional elephant-capturing technique that necessitates the expertise of a highly trained *mahout* or *phandi*[3]. This method is predominantly practiced by them, owing largely to the ecological conditions of their region that are conducive to such operations. In this

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[2] It is a trained elephant especially used to catch the forest elephant and during the time of training the newly caught wild elephant.

[3] *Phandis* are trained experts who perform the crucial task of lassoing wild elephants during trapping expeditions.

technique, a specialist known as the *phandi* undertakes the task of lassoing a wild elephant while mounted on a trained elephant, or *koonk*i. The *phandi*—held in high esteem for his proficiency—is accompanied by an assistant *mahout* whose main responsibility is to command and direct the *koonki* during the operation (Namchoom, p. 54, 2016).

Upon locating a herd, two or more *koonkies* are deployed to pursue and disperse the group, thereby facilitating the identification of a suitable target. Typically, an elephant measuring between 5.5 and 7.5 feet in height is selected. Once identified, the target elephant is systematically separated from the herd. Through coordinated efforts, the *mahout* and *phandi* drive the isolated elephant toward a terrain that restricts its mobility, such as a hilly tract, a major river, or any other natural barrier (Manpoong, personal communication, 16th Jan., 2016).

When the movement of the target elephant is sufficiently constrained, the *phandi* casts the noose over its neck and restrains the animal with the assistance of the *koonki*. Throughout the procedure, the *phandi* occupies the front position on the *koonki*, while the *mahout*, seated behind, maintains control of the trained elephant and simultaneously monitors the movements of other wild elephants. Following its capture, the subdued elephant is escorted and dragged to the training depot with the support of one or more koonkies (Laine, p. 82, 2017).

The *Decoy* method: The decoy method constitutes an alternative traditional technique for capturing wild elephants. In this method, a trained *koonki*—typically a docile, tamed female elephant—is employed as bait and guided by a *mahout* toward a grazing herd. Owing to the elephant's highly developed olfactory and auditory senses, a wild male can detect the presence of a female from a considerable distance, even though its visual acuity is relatively poor; consequently, it is unable to perceive the rider on her back. Once a male elephant exhibits interest and begins to follow the bait, the *koonki* is directed toward a predetermined location where the wild elephant may be subdued. In some cases, the capture is affected by ensnaring the animal's leg or neck with a rope. In other instances, a specially constructed stockade with both entry and exit gates is utilized. The *koonki* is led into the enclosure, and when the pursuing male elephant enters, the trained elephant exits through the opposite gate, allowing both doors to be swiftly secured, thereby trapping the wild elephant (Chowmoung, personal communication, 14th Jan., 2016).

Among the Khamti, the *Khyaw Phan* (*Mela Shikar*) method was generally preferred over the *Kyone* (*Khedda*) method. This preference is attributable to several environmental and practical considerations. The loose soil characteristic of regions inhabited by the Khamti makes the construction of durable stockades difficult, thereby rendering the *kyone* method impractical. Moreover, the *kyone* technique entails substantial expenditure for erecting large, sturdy enclosures and must be employed only along well-established elephant migratory routes. Its rate of success is also comparatively low. In contrast, the *Khyaw Phan* method offers

greater flexibility regarding terrain and location, requires significantly fewer resources, and is comparatively cost-effective. However, it is less suitable for capturing larger elephants; thus, practitioners typically targeted adult but not exceptionally large individuals, as these were more amenable to training (Namchoom, personal communication, 12th Jan., 2016).

Despite the long-standing cultural significance of these practices, it is important to note that, since 1997, the methods described above—along with other traditional elephant-capturing techniques—have been declared illegal in India under wildlife protection regulations (Laine, p. 80, 2012).

Process of Taming the Elephant: Following the successful capture of a wild elephant, the taming and training process begins immediately. Prior to the commencement of formal training, villagers gather to participate in a ritual ceremony, during which a priest (shaman) performs offerings of thanksgiving to the deity *Chao Pling Chang*. The assembled community is served roasted meat, rice-based foods, local wine, betel nut, and other items to mark the auspicious beginning of the taming process (Namchoom, personal communication, 12th Jan., 2016). This ritual underscores the cultural significance of the activity and symbolically initiates the integration of the elephant into a shared human–animal social space. It also highlights the transitional moment when humans and the captured elephant begin to establish familiarity.

The initial step in taming involves carefully examining the elephant for injuries sustained during capture. Any wounds identified are treated immediately. Although they handlers typically employ techniques that minimise distress to the animal, situations occasionally arise in which an uncooperative elephant must be brought under control by withholding food. Even in such instances, however, deliberate injury is rare.

Training begins with the involvement of two *mahouts*; each mounted on their respective *koonki* elephants. The wild elephant is restrained by ropes tied around its neck, torso, and legs, with the two koonkies positioned on either side to limit its movement. This phase primarily serves to familiarise the wild elephant with domesticated elephants and to accustom it to human presence. After approximately 9–10 days, once the animal shows signs of adaptation, it can typically be handled by a single *koonki* (Personal Communication with Namchoom, 12th Jan., 2016; Laine, p.79, 2012).

The overall taming process lasts about 3–4 weeks. During this period, a designated *mahout* remains with the elephant for most of the day, facilitating continuous interaction. Through this sustained contact, both elephant and *mahout* gradually develop a shared mode of communication and begin to construct a mutually intelligible behavioural framework. This interpersonal process is crucial for establishing trust, emotional bonding, and the long-term cooperative partnership necessary for future work tasks. A primary method used to cultivate this relationship involves chanting: Khampti handlers vocalise rhythmic instructions during each stage of training, using sound as a communicative and instructional tool. Additionally, the elephant is repeatedly

touched near its ears, with each touch accompanied by a distinct verbal command—an exercise repeated hundreds of times daily. Gentle caressing further familiarises the animal with human touch (Personal communication with Namchoom, 12th Jan., 2016; Laine, p.79, 2012).

Fundamentally, the taming process is built upon fostering trust between the elephant and the *mahout.* Over time, this bond enables coordinated labour, visible in demanding tasks such as hauling logs or pushing heavy loads. Through these methods, the Khamti are able to transform a powerful wild animal into a cooperative working partner—an achievement impossible for an untrained individual acting alone.

Rationale for Continued Capture of Wild Elephants: A central question emerges during my studies regarding why the Khamti continued to engage in elephant capture despite maintaining a substantial number of already domesticated elephants capable of reproduction. Several considerations explain this preference for capturing wild individuals.

Foremost among these is the high cost and lengthy duration associated with breeding elephants in captivity. An elephant's gestation period spans approximately 22 months, after which the calf requires up to six years of maternal nursing. Furthermore, an additional decade is necessary before the young elephant reaches working age. Thus, raising a single working elephant may require 15–20 years, during which the community must assume the significant burden of feeding and caring for both mother and offspring. In contrast, capturing and taming a wild adult demands only one to two months of intensive effort, making it a far more efficient and economically viable strategy (Manpoong, personal communication, 16th Jan., 2016).

Wild-caught elephants were also considered to possess a more natural assertiveness and responsiveness compared to those reared in captivity. Conversely, elephants born and raised under human care often lack fear or respect for handlers and may become dangerous once fully grown. These behavioural concerns further reinforced the cultural preference for capturing wild adults rather than relying on long-term breeding practices (Manpoong, personal communication, 16th Jan., 2016).

For these reasons, the Khamti historically regarded the capture and taming of forest elephants as a more practical, economical, and behaviourally advantageous method of procuring working elephants.

4.   Importance of Elephants in Khampti Society

The utilisation of elephants occupies a central place in the socio-economic and cultural life of the Khamti community. Historically renowned as skilled elephant catchers, the Khamtis are the only tribe in Arunachal Pradesh known to have traditionally employed elephants for agricultural ploughing and, in earlier times, even for plucking tea leaves. Although such practices were largely restricted to the fields of village chiefs and

affluent households, they nonetheless represent a significant achievement in the domain of human–animal collaboration. These practices illustrate the Khamti community's distinctive expertise in integrating elephants into everyday productive activities (Tai Khamti Singpho Council, p.15, 2022).

Local folklore and oral traditions further suggest that elephants may have been deployed in warfare in earlier periods. However, throughout the course of fieldwork and data collection, no conclusive historical evidence could be identified to substantiate the use of elephants in battle by the Khamti. Such accounts therefore remain within the realm of legend rather than verifiable historical fact.

The cultural significance of elephants is also reflected in the Khamti belief in an elephant deity, who is regarded as the guardian of all elephants. According to this belief system, any harm or mistreatment inflicted upon an elephant invites divine retribution: the *mahout* responsible may lose the ability to capture elephants in the future, and even the tamed elephants under his care may perish. This cosmological framework shapes a strong ethical orientation toward animal care. Consequently, *mahouts* refrain from making elephants work under harsh sunlight and typically schedule labour for early morning or late afternoon hours to avoid discomfort to the animal (Personal Communication with Namchoom, 12th Jan., 2016; Laine, p.79, 2012).

The economic importance of elephants became especially pronounced during the late twentieth century, when the timber trade expanded rapidly in Namsai and surrounding areas. Numerous sawmills emerged, and large quantities of timber were transported to Assam until the Hon'ble Supreme Court imposed a ban on timber operations in Arunachal Pradesh in 1996. During this period, human labour alone proved insufficient for hauling and loading large timber logs. Elephants thus became indispensable to the timber industry, owing to their exceptional strength and manoeuvrability in difficult terrain. Tamed elephants were widely employed for dragging logs, loading timber onto trolleys and trucks, and performing other heavy tasks that human workers could not manage (Personal Communication with Namchoom, 12th Jan., 2016; Laine, p.80, 2012).

In addition to their use in timber extraction, elephants were commonly hired out by their owners to sawmills on a contractual basis, further integrating them into the local economy. This dual economic and cultural importance underscores the deep-rooted interdependence between the Khampti community and their elephants, making the latter an essential component of both livelihood and identity.

Present Situation: In Arunachal Pradesh, the Khamti population is dispersed across several pockets of *Namsai* District, with a significant concentration in the *Chongkham* region near the *Tengapani*. Historically, this area was reputed to be one of the richest villages in Asia due to the substantial revenue generated from timber extraction and related commercial activities. The Khamptis' advantageous position within the timber trade enabled many households to attain considerable economic influence and facilitated their prominence in regional business and politics relative to other tribal communities of the state (Laine, p.79, 2012).

However, the socio-economic landscape of the Khamti community has undergone profound transformation following the governmental ban on timber felling and the prohibition on elephant capture. While they, adhering to their Buddhist ethos, largely accepted these regulations without major resistance—recognising their ecological necessity for forest and biodiversity conservation—the repercussions on community livelihoods have been significant. Families that were once economically prosperous through elephant-assisted timber operations now struggle to meet routine household needs.

Chongkham, once a region where nearly every household owned at least one elephant, has witnessed a drastic decline in elephant possession. Increasingly stringent restrictions on timber activities, coupled with improved transportation infrastructure and the availability of mechanised equipment, have sharply reduced the practical utility of elephants. Consequently, many owners have sold their elephants, as the cost of maintaining them without economic return has become unsustainable. This decline has contributed to a broader economic downturn and has eroded the longstanding symbiotic relationship between the Khamptis and their elephants (Personal communication with Manpoong, 16th Jan., 2016; Laine, p.83, 2012).

5. Conclusion

The discussion above highlights how the traditional art of capturing and taming elephants once played a central role in shaping the socio-economic fabric of Khamti society. Before the arrival of modern infrastructure, elephants were the primary means of transportation and were indispensable in agriculture, forest work, and milling activities. Today, however, younger generations are increasingly unaware of this historical significance. Rapid infrastructural development, the rise of modern machinery, and widespread illegal poaching—which prompted the Government of India to ban elephant capture—have collectively rendered traditional elephant-trapping practices obsolete. As a result, the intimate human–elephant relationship that once defined Khamti identity has gradually faded from collective memory, leading to a decline in both the cultural importance of elephants and the prestige once associated with the community's specialised knowledge of elephant trapping and taming.

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