

# CERD Green Chronicles

## THE LOW RUMBLES OF GIBBON SANCTUARY

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Laxmi Tule one ordinary woman, living the life similar to others, except she had to work harder than most would do in two lifetimes. Laxmi was born to tea garden workers. She started going to the tea gardens with her mother since she was 3 years old.

She found out there were other pursuits to follow just being seated as her mother worked plucking tea leaves. She would observe the strayed butterfly or start recognizing the Hoolock gibbon or the snow capped monkey from their call or took the fascination for the distant elephant roaming about eating the underground grasses and shrubs inside the tea garden. She realized there were names given to some regular elephant based on their appearance or temperament. For example, there was one tusker named “Shiva” with a broken tusk, yet had a calm demeanor around people. Everyone was comfortable working even twenty feet away. Another elephant with one twisted tusk was “Kalia”, who was temperamental and particularly noisy to the sound of machines.

Laxmi father was a tribal in Jharkhand who was brought to work in tea gardens by the Britishers en masse during the late twentieth century to work in tea gardens. The monopoly of China was broken by hook and crook and the East India Company wanted to take advantage of its commercial edges in its global trade. These people without boundaries were brought in thousands from different parts of the country for tea cultivation into a world that knew only division of things. It was a drastic change of world for the tribals who lived in the forest with little and yet had all the luxuries that outside world did not possess, aspired to possess, but could never possess. Yet, they struggle with their new identity.

Laxmi saw the change in ways of their living lead to a change in their relations with the elephants. How co-existence was turning into a daily fight now. How humans have lot of resentment for pachyderms for eating their crops.

Old villagers also spoke about the rare sights of elephants before with great fondness. One concern they shared was how elephants have started growing more and more violent in these areas as villagers stopped them from eating the crops. They don't blame the elephants too, for humans sleep and eat in their lands now. Both elephants and humans here in Gibbon Sanctuary and humans are desperate for the same source of food.

One of those memories from this long and now distant life happened winter evening on her way back home. Now a lady of fifty-five, she on her way back home from the local market. Selling vegetables from the small vegetable garden we grew beside her thatched house gave her special pride. It was a little darker than usual and it was advised to come back home sooner for the fear of elephants. She had brought some cucumber and brinjals from the money she had earned.

Walking hurriedly on her way back, she often wondered how a little light always stayed between the railway track on which she had to come back home. This thought amused her now as she grew into an old lady. Counting one after another, slowly stepping into the middle of each cement block became a game like it always did since she was a child.

She walked for twenty minutes on the track with the looming dark around her, and soon to creep inside her. Her right step leapt out the track with the jovial signature of a distant light bulb coming from the school. The dust road of two hundred meters opens into the primary school ground but only after with a little thicket of bushes in between. The fear of encountering an elephant always looms at the back of the head. After a few seconds of walking, she froze with what she saw. She was staring into the eyes of an elephant just three feet away from her. It's a moment one dreads in their wildest dreams when the worst form of things could ever happen to yourself, happen to you. A moment when tongue shrinks dry and the whole life freezes and nothing else matters. All the life came to that moment, good or bad, who decides. After a few seconds of becoming a witness to the largest emptiness and she was back into senses, which only made things worse. You never realize the true size of things until they are too close to you. She took those shaking legs a few feet back without taking her eyes of the elephant. The unflinching elephant did not move too. Laxmi at the moment did not run and luckily did not shout for help as well but started backing towards her house, keeping a safe distance from the giant. Her heart rang and blood curled. Relieved from not being killed and without looking back, she started walking towards the school, striding this time. As she looked back, she saw that the elephant was following her at his own speed. This only shook her belief over the massive win over certain death, a few minutes back. She paced herself further hoping to see the pachyderm move back but the elephant showed a purposeful and dignified walk. A strange notion passed through her brain and she took the basket from her head into her hands. She dropped one brinjal from her small basket. The elephant rolled the small delight with a quick gulp and kept standing there. It moved slowly this time pacing equal with Laxmi as she walked ahead. Laxmi moved further few feet anticipating the elephant approaching her from behind, she dropped another brinjal on the path and kept moving. Soon another followed and she became convinced that the elephant meant no harm to her and just wanted to have what she had planned for her dinner, but only asking politely. She reached the school building this time under the hood of the sparkling powerful halogen light and looked back, she saw the elephant little far away standing in the dark with her trunk pointing towards her sniffing. It turned back slowly merging into the same darkness, it once emerged from.

With a faint smile on her lips reaching her eyes, she started moving towards her home. One the way back into the small village, lots of questions were asked. How was she so late? She told them what occurred that night, to which people had different responses. Some said she was lucky, some retold stories about those two dangerous elephants that lurk around the railway tracks. Some recalled Ganesha (The elephant god). Yet, there was a little distance she felt in herself from all the people. The smile had not vanished in her and yet she felt its presence deep inside of her. All this life had come to this moment. It was a moment meant only for her, only for her to grasp.