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Jumbo find: Asian elephants ritually bury their calves, finds Bengal study

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KOLKATA: A study has, for the first time ever, documented that Asian elephants bury their calves who die prematurely - a social behaviour that has hitherto found mention in African literature, presumably referring to the larger elephant species from that continent.

The finding has excited zoologists and experts who study social behaviour in animals, as "calf burial" has only been documented in a species of termite (*Reticulitermes fukienensis*), but in no other large mammal.

In five case studies in north Bengal between 2022 and 2023, herd members were found dragging the calves some distance - away

from human settlements - before burying them in a "leg-upright position" at irrigation trenches inside tea gardens. The study has been published in the internationally acclaimed 'Journal of Threatened Taxa'.

"The study area covered fragmented forests, tea estates, agricultural lands and military establishments," said Parveen Kaswan, DFO of Jaldapara wildlife division, formerly DFD of Buxa Tiger Reserve, who has co-authored the study with Akashdeep Roy, a senior research fellow at IISER Pune.

Parveen Kaswan, one of the authors, said their study explained burial strategy of elephants in irrigation drains of tea estates by presenting five case reports. "We found that the elephants carry carcasses, holding on to the trunks

or legs, for a distance before burying them. Direct human intervention was not recorded in any of the five deaths."

The cases have been documented in Debpara, Chunabhati, Bharnabari, Majherdabri and the New Dooars tea gardens near Gorumara and Buxa. The calves were aged between three and 12 months.

Most surprising, according to the study, is the positioning of the carcasses that are buried: in all five cases, the legs were upright, with the head, trunk and dorsal regions fully buried. "The positioning could be explained for better grip for herd members to hold and lay the calf in the trench. This also reflects the care and affection of the herd for the calf. It suggests that because of a space crunch, the herd prioritizes the head for burial before feet," added Kaswan.

In most cases, while burying the carcass, members of the elephant herd "vocalized" for about 30-40 minutes. This may signify mourning, the researchers conjecture, though more study needs to be done to explain this, they said.

According to long-term observation, elephant movement frequency had reduced in these areas. "Jumbos started using parallel pathways, clearly avoiding the path where carcasses were buried," the study claims, adding that this behaviour contrasted with that of African elephants, who spend a lot of time investigating and exploring the remains.

Padma Shri Parbati Barua, a renowned animal conservationist, said: "Elephants are social animals. However, 'calf burial' by Asian elephants remains almost unstudied. Though I haven't gone through the study, I have never heard of such a thing being documented."

