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Ensure life through crop insurance

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By Sonia Jabbar

I was horrified and deeply saddened by the painful death on May 27 of a pregnant elephant in Kerala's Palakkad district after she was fed a pineapple packed with firecrackers. But as someone who runs a successful elephant conservation programme at Nuxalbari Tea Estate in northern West Bengal, it was just another one in a sadly long series of cruel and unnecessary deaths of elephants.

For those who recently woke up to #elephantlivesmatter, they should know that despite India's elephants being on the endangered list, these animals are regularly hounded, killed and injured. Entire herds are electrocuted by farmers who try and save their crops, and by wires left hanging by electricity departments. They are shot at with guns, and targeted with spears and arrows. Elephants and their babies are chased with burning torches and sometimes suffer horrific burn injuries. They are stoned and teased by young men — who just do it for fun and selfies.

Entire herds are mown down by speeding trains — almost 70 elephants were killed by trains between 2013 and mid-2019, mostly in Assam and northern West Bengal. Last year, an elephant tried to save her young calf from a speeding train. The herd was able to cross, but the young elephant got stuck. The mother, who was pregnant at the time, stood between the train and her calf. Neither of them survived. Local farmers cremated them, I buried their bones.

A few months ago, an elephant gave birth on a dry riverbed. Elephant babies need to get on their feet immediately if they are to survive. But there was something wrong. The baby couldn't get up. The mother tried, the herd tried, the baby tried. In the meantime, a crowd of men had gathered. And what did this group do? They pelted stones at the herd, at the mother, and at the struggling infant. All the while, they laughed and recorded it on their phones — which is how I came to know of this vile act. The herd was forced to retreat to the edge of the forest. The mother continued to urge her baby to move and shelter it from the shower of stones. The baby, however, died.

In the Palakkad incident, the elephant was not targeted. The pineapple bomb was probably left for wild boar that was causing crop depredation. The farmers used this method to save their crops. The pregnant elephant's death was unintentional and, therefore, not murder, as is being described in sections of the media. I do not believe the 'culprits' of the elephant's death should be meted out 'exemplary punishment'. This cruel method to save crops — whether by using bombs, firecrackers or electric wires — needs to stop. But farmers need solutions, not lectures, and much less punishment.

Gol should immediately make crop depredation by wildlife qualify for crop insurance. If a farmer is paying a premium to be insured against crop destruction caused by hailstorms, cyclones and floods, it stands to reason that crop depredation caused by wildlife, occurring with tiresome regularity, is also insurable. If farmers got even 50% of what they lose to wildlife — whether elephants or wild boar or nilgai — much of this violence targeted against animals would stop.

And why do wild animals leave the forest to raid crops? Mostly because humans are eating up their habitats — forest land. Elephant herds, which need large tracts of natural forests with grassland and water bodies for their nutritional requirements, are being squeezed into reserves that are shrinking by the day because of human greed. But that is another, much larger tragic story.

(The writer is owner, Nuxalbari Tea Estate, West Bengal)

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