

Tragic legacy of Bangladesh's captive elephants

MIFTAHUL JANNAT

Imagine a child ripped from its mother's embrace, shackled in heavy metal chains, subjected to systemic starvation, and relentless beating until resistance gives way to fear. All its instincts utterly crushed and soul completely shattered—until what remains is not a child, but an obedient tool. This is how the traditional Hadani training of baby elephants unfolds, and disturbingly, it continues to this day.

The child in training may not be human, but for an animal as exceptionally intelligent, deeply social, and fiercely bonded to family as an elephant, the pain, trauma, and loss are no less profound. Behind the spectacle of their captivity, the silent suffering remains largely unseen.

"Early separation from the mother and herd, followed by violent "breaking" methods locally known as Hadani causes profound and lasting biological, psychological, and behavioural harm," mentioned Dr Reza Khan, eminent wildlife, zoo and safari park specialist with over four decades of experience of working in Bangladesh and the United



On January 17 in Shibbari, Sylhet, a female captive elephant named "Sundarmala" was struck by a train, leaving her legs broken and trapped in a ditch. She endured unimaginable pain for two days before passing away on January 19.

PHOTO: COLLECTED FROM FACEBOOK

2026, a video went viral showing him shackled and beaten during Hadani training in Moulvibazar's Kulaura Upazila, sparking nationwide outrage. Following intervention by the local Forest Department, Birbahadur and his 42-year-old mother, Sundarmala, were reportedly released into the Kalapahar forest.

However, this release proved largely symbolic rather than a genuine return to freedom. Releasing captive elephants into the forest without proper rehabilitation only exposed them to greater danger—and the consequences emerged just ten days later.

Sundarmala was struck by a train in the Shibbari area of Sylhet. The collision shattered her spine, broke her legs, and caused massive internal injuries. She tumbled into a ditch and remained abandoned by her mahout and owner. She suffered for two days before dying, while her owner took no responsibility for her. Her death left the young Birbahadur motherless, once again trapped in a system that treats captive elephants only as sources of income.

"The accident happened at around 10:00pm, but no assistance arrived for nearly 12 hours. An animal of this size lying in a ditch would never go unnoticed," said Amirul Rajiv, animal rights and environmental activist and coordinator of the Bangladesh Tree Protection Movement. "Wild elephants can regulate their body temperature, but captive ones are vulnerable to cold. In places like Thailand, elephants are covered with thick blankets for protection. Sundarmala remained in cold water without any warmth, and

even after being pulled out, no measures were taken to keep her warm. Moreover, chains were used around her neck to pull her out, which may have caused further internal injuries."

According to experts, such emergencies should be handled exclusively by trained forest department officials. Instead, large crowds often gather at the site, worsening the situation. "Uncontrolled crowds only increase stress and panic for injured elephants," Rajiv added. "What was needed was a swift, professional response from trained forest officials and immediate veterinary care."

Regal giants reduced to mere 'slavery'
Sundarmala's death was not an isolated incident. In May 2023, another calf named Rajabahadur was killed at the Tongi rail gate in Dhaka. The mahout had tied the mother elephant near the railway tracks. Terrified by the sound of a passing train, the calf ran astray and was dragged to its death, while the mother was forced to witness her child's gruesome death before being beaten and driven away from the scene.

Authorities failed to hold the owners accountable in either case, issuing no notices or pursuing justice. This lack of consequences allows abuse to continue unchecked, perpetuating a cycle of cruelty and neglect that repeatedly surfaces in incidents of elephants dying in train collisions, electrocution, and other forms of human-elephant conflict.

"When we talk about elephant conservation in Bangladesh, elephants are described as critically endangered—but nowhere is it stated that only wild elephants are critically endangered while

private or captive elephants are not a concern. In reality, all elephants should be considered critically endangered," emphasised animal rights activist, Founder and Chairperson of People for Animal Welfare (PAW) Foundation, Rakibul Haque Amil.

While there is at least some discussion and effort—effective or not—around protecting wild elephants, captive elephants receive almost no attention. "Their deaths are often dismissed as matters of private losses, rather than conservation. It is time to formally bring captive elephants under the country's conservation framework," added Amil.

These critically endangered animals are subjected to multiple forms of exploitation.

Commercial use and extortion: Captive elephants are often forced to perform on the streets to solicit money or rented out for wedding ceremonies. Some groups involved in extortion also use elephants to illegally collect money from the public.

Mutilation for ivory: Male elephants sometimes have their tusks cut at the root for illegal sale, leading to severe infections, chronic pain, and long-term suffering.

Forced or unnatural breeding: Captive elephants are also often subjected to coercive breeding practices. "Forced breeding (mating) is essentially rape," said Amil of the PAW Foundation. "Elephants are extremely selective. Female elephants do not mate indiscriminately; they carefully choose a bull, much like humans consider who can provide safety and security for her child until it matures—sometimes up to 15 years."

Unnatural breeding carries additional risks. "Captive breeding programmes typically rely on very few individuals, increasing hidden inbreeding and accelerating the loss of genetic diversity," noted Dr Reza Khan. "Over time, this weakens disease resistance, fertility, and adaptability. Forced breeding may also favour traits unsuitable for survival in the wild, while diverting attention and resources away from genuine conservation efforts."

Overwork and neglect: Many captive elephants are worked to the point of collapse and are sometimes underfed and dehydrated. An adult elephant requires around 100 litres of water a day, a basic need that is often denied. Numerous cases show elephants dying from exhaustion, a direct result of chronic neglect.

Breaking the chains of captivity: What must change

Although a High Court rule in February 2024 suspended the issuance and renewal of licences to adopt elephants from the wild following a writ petition, the ruling did little to improve the condition of elephants already in captivity. Forced breeding has continued, increasing their numbers—and with it, exploitation and suffering.

Animal rights activists, wildlife biologists, and field experts stress the urgent need for an updated and publicly available discrete national list of all captive elephants, maintained by the Forest Department, to ensure proper tracking and prevent abuse.

Furthermore, experts recommended:

- Immediately halting forced breeding and holding licensed owners strictly accountable for deaths, abuse, or neglect.
- Establishing a mandatory national registration system for all captive elephants, supported by microchipping, DNA profiling, and a transparent central database.

- Empowering authorities with adequate funding to conduct unannounced inspections, confiscate abused elephants, and bring captive elephants under conservation oversight.

- Revitalising the Wildlife Wing of the Forest Department with full-time wildlife biologists, adequate budgets, trained manpower, veterinary facilities, GPS and radio-collar systems, and proper elephant management infrastructure.

- Expanding government-supported 'Elephant Response Teams' nationwide to manage human-elephant conflict without violence.

- Strictly enforcing the Wildlife Management Order 2026, alongside meaningful penalties, habitat protection, community engagement, and a functional Wildlife Trust Fund.

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In the traditional 'Hadani' training, baby elephants are torn from their mothers and tied to logs, dragged across the field to break their wild spirit—turning these gentle souls into tools for human control.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Arab Emirates. "Elephants are highly social and cognitively complex animals. Removing a calf from its family during critical developmental stages disrupts normal brain development, stress-hormone regulation, learning capacity, and social behaviour."

Research shows that elephants subjected to such treatment frequently develop chronic trauma-like conditions, including persistently elevated stress hormones, abnormal fear responses and impaired social skills. Many show heightened aggression or extreme withdrawal and struggle to cope with unfamiliar situations.

A mother and calf lost to cruelty
The human inflicted suffering of captive elephants has once again come to light in the recent story of a seven-year-old calf named Birbahadur. Earlier in January

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"When we talk about elephant conservation in Bangladesh, elephants are described as critically endangered—but nowhere is it stated that only wild elephants are critically endangered while

were once rare—maybe two or three would wash up on Cox's Bazar beach," he said. "Now, large numbers are stranding on the shore, and fishermen are finding them in their nets."

What is clearer, he added, is the sharp decline in pelagic fish species, the mainstay of coastal fisheries. "We have clear evidence that pelagic species are declining at an alarming rate. An almost 80 percent decline didn't happen overnight. It occurred gradually over many years."

Coastal environmental conditions may be tipping the balance in jellyfish's favour. "Our coastal and ocean waters are low in oxygen beyond a certain depth," Dr Sharifuzzaman said. "Most fish can't survive this, but jellyfish thrive. When natural equilibrium is disrupted, someone benefits. In this case, jellyfish."

This imbalance is already affecting fisheries. "As jellyfish populations increase, they replace fish in fishermen's nets," he said. "Rising jellyfish numbers signal commercial fisheries decline, which we've seen alongside an 80 percent drop in pelagic species."

Studies by the Monterey Bay Aquarium further suggest that jellyfish play a role in transferring microplastics into marine food chains. By ingesting plastic particles directly or through contaminated prey, jellyfish can pass pollution up the chain when they are consumed by larger species, deepening the ecological consequences of their spread. For coastal communities, that shift would mean not just ecological loss, but the slow erosion of a way of life that has sustained generations.

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Fish stocks collapse in the Bay of Bengal, fishermen at risk

YSTIAQUE AHMED

A historic decline in fish stocks in the Bay of Bengal is reshaping both the marine ecosystem and the lives of thousands of coastal fishing families. A recent comprehensive fisheries survey shows that the stock of small pelagic species has fallen by 78.6 percent in just seven years, from 158,100 tonnes in 2018 to only 33,811 tonnes in 2025. As fish disappear, jellyfish are moving in, increasingly dominating coastal waters where fishermen make their living.

The Bay of Bengal is central to Bangladesh's food security and economy. Fish from these waters contribute around 12-15 percent of the country's total fish production, according to a Department of Fisheries report dated June 26, 2025. Fish provide nearly 60 percent of national animal protein intake and play a significant role in blue economy exports. A collapse of this scale therefore raises urgent concerns about the future of fisheries and the livelihoods of fishermen in these areas.

For fishing families, these environmental shifts are not abstract trends but daily struggles. Najir Hossain, a fisherman, and his wife Rokeya describe how unreliable catches have pushed them into debt. "We catch fish throughout the year, and only two months are restricted," Rokeya said. "But fish are so few in number now that we have to take out loans just to get by."

Their income, once relatively stable, has become uncertain. "Our husbands and sons rent trawlers from the owners and go out to sea. We used to earn a decent income from the catches," she said. "Now that is no longer guaranteed."

They also face enforcement pressures and insecurity at sea. Rokeya alleged that nets are



As trawlers return from the Bay of Bengal, hilsa catches are being carried to a landing centre in Cox's Bazar. Fishermen say lighter hauls this year (2025) are failing to cover their costs.

sometimes confiscated or destroyed during patrols. These nets and fishing gear are worth a huge sum. On top of that, they do not own them; the trawler owner does. When they are taken or burned, the loss is huge.

Trawler owners echo these concerns. Abul Kalam, who owns around 60 fishing trawlers, says the decline has been steady and puzzling. "Five to ten years ago, we had plenty of fish. It kept decreasing year after year, but we don't know the exact reason behind this decline," he said.

Fishing seasons have also become less predictable. "Normally, in winter fish go deeper, and the rainy season is our peak time, especially June and July," Kalam explained. "One trawler carries seven to eight fishermen in total. In a single trip, we can

earn between 1.2 to 2 lakh taka per trawler, but the fuel and other costs are higher. Now, even in peak season, catches are low." After all the expenses, each of the fishermen earns around 10 thousand taka per trip."

Higher market prices have partially offset losses, but not enough to ensure stability. "Before, when we had plenty of fish, prices were low. Now we catch less fish, but prices go up. In that sense, it kind of balances out," he said. "Still, when catches are poor, we have to take loans to continue operations. We have labourers and fishermen whose lives depend on these trawlers."

When fishing fails, many workers are forced to find temporary alternatives on land. "Some work as drivers for local tom-toms, while others work as day labourers," Kalam

said. "That's how they survive."

Marine scientists say the decline in fish and the rise in jellyfish are driven not by a single cause, but by a combination of long-term environmental and human pressures. "Factors such as climate change, global warming, pollution, and overfishing are behind both trends," said Dr Md Ashraful Haque, CSO at the Cox's Bazar Marine Fisheries Research Centre.

Scientists note that jellyfish are benefiting from these pressures. Dr Haque said they feed directly on fish eggs and fry, hampering recovery. "Jellyfish prey on fish eggs and fry, contributing to fish decline," he said. He also highlighted a breakdown in predator-prey balance, noting a sharp fall in sea turtle populations, which normally keep jellyfish numbers in check.

The increase in jellyfish is also creating operational problems for fishermen. "Jellyfish get trapped in nets and gear," Dr Haque said. "A single jellyfish can weigh 10-12 kilograms, and a swarm can easily damage or destroy fishing nets."

Observations suggest that jellyfish sightings have increased noticeably in recent years. Dr SM Sharifuzzaman, director and professor at the Institute of Marine Sciences, University of Chittagong, said the phenomenon has become visible only recently. "Jellyfish are a recent phenomenon; we have been observing their rise over the last five years," he said. "After February and March, when the climate gets warmer, we see the presence of jellyfish or their swarms in the sea."

Dr Sharifuzzaman explained that jellyfish, or gelatinous zooplankton, include both small and large species that can bloom rapidly under favourable conditions. "They