

The Role of Elephant Care Personnel: A Study of Bardiya National Park, Nepal

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Received: August, 2024; Revised: February, 2025; Accepted: June, 2025

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<https://doi.org/10.3126/pg.v7i1.79555>

Abstract

Historically, Hattisar was integral to royal hunting and later integrated into national park conservation. This paper aims to analyze the job description, facilities, and challenges of the staff of Hattisar. The study used descriptive and exploratory research designs to examine staff roles, services, and challenges at Hattisar in Bardiya National Park. Data were gathered from official records, interviews, and focus group discussions, and analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a comprehensive overview. The staff are primarily Tharu indigenous people and perform crucial tasks such as elephant care, anti-poaching patrols, and tourism support. Despite their contributions being very important, the study shows that they face major problems in contract-based employment. inadequate infrastructure and resources, high occupational risks due to wildlife encounters or natural hazards.

Keywords: Elephant handlers, Job description, Facilities, Challenge, Mahaut

1. Introduction

Nepal's Hattisar (elephant stable) is essential to the nation's attempts to conserve elephants. The government of Nepal has been using captive elephants for tourist tours and anti-poaching patrols for many years. The state has been planning and implementing programs to manage captive elephants. But sometimes forgotten is the condition of the workers in Hattisar. Under the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Department are Kusaha in Koshitappu Wildlife Reserve, Amlekhganj in Parsa National

Park, Sauraha, Kasar, and Khorsar in Chitwan National Park, Overi in Banke National Park, Shivpur in Bardiya National Park, Hattisar in Thakurdwar, and Piparia in Shuklaphanta National Park. Once they have mastered the art of handling elephants, the personnel who work with them either become volunteers or Dhakariyas for a set amount of time. By enlisting elephants, Elephant handlers are making a significant contribution. Hattisar's staff ranks are Phanit, Pachhua, and Mahut (DNPWC, 2024).

The royal family traditionally maintained elephant stables as a symbol of prestige, primarily to facilitate luxurious hunting expeditions. Those people who work in Hattisar are called Hattisare or elephant handlers (Hart & Locke, 2007). Tharu is an indigenous people to the once malarial Tarai, no longer only staffs the stables of today, their tradition shapes ritual and institutional life in the Sarkari Hattisar (Guneratne, 2007). The Nepalese Kings first provided funding for the elephant stable, which was recruited through kinship and local networks. The Tharu people served as a hub for capturing wild elephants for trade and tribute. The Hattisar was later kept to support royal hunting trips (Rashtriya Shikar), during which foreign dignitaries were invited to hunt bears, tigers, rhinos, and leopards during the middle of the 19th and mid-20th centuries (Locke, 2008). The management system for Nepal's captive elephants was then used in the 20th century to support the country's new tourist and conservation goals. Consequently, the Sarkari Hattisar was integrated into the Ministry of Forestry's Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation. Captive elephants have been employed for anti-poaching patrols, large mammal monitoring, conservation initiatives, and nature tourism since the early 1970s, when the National Park was established (Locke, 2011).

The historical function of Nepal's Hattisar, or elephant stables, underwent a significant transformation in the mid-20th century. Initially, under the Rana regime (1846-1951), the Hattisar primarily served the lavish royal hunting expeditions known as Rashtriya Shikar (Stiller, 1993; Whelpton, 2005), reaching their zenith during this period (Smythies, 1942). The 1951 political changes, however, marked a turning point. There were 31 government Hattisar in Nepal, covering the Terai districts of Jhapa and Kanchanpur. Historical records also demonstrate that Nepal Hattisars possessed the skills, equipment, and methods necessary to catch and train wild elephants, but, due to a decrease in the wild population, the practice of capturing wild elephants was stopped after 1969 (Gopali Yadav, 2003). The subsequent integration of international aid and post-World War II development initiatives (Whelpton, 2005) profoundly influenced Hattisar's role. Although initially retained for royal hunts under the restored Shah monarchy, the institution's function gradually evolved beyond its purely

ceremonial and extractive origins. Further research is needed to fully elucidate the complexities of this transition and its implications for elephant management and Nepal's socio-political landscape.

This article examines the staff of Hattisar, located within Bardiya National Park. The general objective of this study is to investigate the working conditions and experiences of the staff of Hattisar. The specific objectives of this article are as follows: to describe the role undertaken by the staff of Hattisar, to analyze the services and facilities available to the staff of Hattisar, and to explore the challenges faced by the staff in their workplace.

2. Methodology

The descriptive research design has been used to respond to the first and second research questions, and an exploratory research design has been employed to respond to the third research question. Data relating to the job descriptions of Hattisar's staff have been collected from the Bardiya National Park office. The study included a diverse group of respondents directly involved in the operations and management of the Hattisar (elephant stable), including Phanit, Pachhuwa, and Mahut in Bardiya National Park. In-depth interviews with the conservation officer have been conducted to comprehend these job descriptions. Information on the facilities and services provided to the staff has been collected from official records at the Bardiya National Park office, while views of these facilities and services have been collected through focus group discussions. Information has been collected through focus group discussions to identify the challenges of the staff at the workplace in Hattisar, allowing for a deeper understanding through group interaction and shared experiences. The information about the staff, including their rank, gender, and ethnicity, has been presented in a table format. The job descriptions have been analyzed thematically, with the descriptions provided according to the respective ranks of the workers. Quantitative data for the services and facilities were presented in tables, while qualitative data were discussed and analyzed descriptively. This method gives one a complete picture of the work setting, services, and issues experienced by the employees at Hattisar.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Frontline employees of Bardiya National Park

Bardiya National Park was initially established as a Royal Hunting Reserve in 1969. The area of the park is 968 km², and its buffer zone is 507 km². The park is located in the lowland region in the sub-tropical climatic zone and has a tropical monsoon climate. The Hattisar is around 3 km south of the park headquarters at Shivapur, Thakurdwara Municipality 9. In 2028, Bardiya Hattisar, Shivpur, was founded. In 2026, the late King Mahendra established the Royal Shikar Reserve, which covers the

region in the Bardiya district between the Babai and Karnali rivers. The Royal Shikar Reserve was guarded by the Royal Karnali Forest Guard. Furthermore, Banke Gulari Hattisar in the Banke district was moved to Bardiya Hattisar Shivpur in 2028. Additionally, in 2028, Banke Gulari Hattisar in the Banke district was moved and renamed Bardiya Hattisar Shivpur. A few elephants have been placed up temporarily at Park Headquarters in the Gaida Machan area, and they are also occasionally moved to the Guthi and Parewaodar areas. Bardiya Hattisar was established in 2034 B.S., about 1 km south of the Park headquarters in Shivapur, Thakurbaba-9. The BNP currently owns 13 elephants; five are kept at Shivapur, three in Thakurdwara, two in Gaida Machan, Geruwa floodplain, and two in Guthi, Babai valley (Bardiya National Park 2024).

Table 1

Gender and Rank-wise Frontline employees of Bardiya National Park

Rank	Male		Female		Total
	No.	Percent	No.	Percent	
Phanit	10	100.00	-	-	10
Pachhuwa	10	100.00	-	-	10
Mahut	9	90.00	1	10.00	10
Total	29	96.67	1	3.33	30

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

The staff of Hattisar at Bardiya National Park is predominantly male (96.67%), with females constituting only 3.33%. Staff of the Phanit rank are all male; there are ten of them, accounting for all of the workers in this rank. This rank has no female employees, hence the female representation is zero. Ten employees make up the Phanit rank overall. In the same way, every staff member in the Pachhuwa rank is male, with 10 men comprising up 100% of the workforce. This rank has zero female representation since there are no female employees in it. Additionally, there are ten workers in the Pachhuwa rank overall. The Mahut rank has nine male staff members, or 90% of the workforce, making it a largely male workplace. Nonetheless, there is a limited number of female staff, just 1 or 10%.

The staff of Hattisar at Bardiya National Park is 30. Of them, 27, or 90.00 % staff Tharu. The participation of staff of Hattisar by caste and ethnicity is shown in the table below.

Table 2

Distribution of staff of Hattisar at Bardiya National Park by the classification of the Caste/Ethnicity

Rank	Caste/Ethnicity & Gender										Total
	Bahun		Aadiwasi		Madhesi		Pahade		Madhesi		
	Cheetri		Janajati (Tharu)				Dalit		Dalit		
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
Phanit	1	-	9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	10
Pachhuwa	-	-	10	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	10
Mahut	1	-	7	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	10
Total	2	-	26	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	30
Male & Female Total	2		27		-		1		-		
Percentage	6.67		90.00		-		3.33		-		100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

To analyze the inclusion of staff of Hattisar based on caste/ethnicity, the caste/ethnicity has been divided into six groups: Bahun Chhetri, Adivasi Janajati, Madhesi, Hill Dalit, and Madhesi Dalit. Out of the total 30 staff of Hattisar, the participation of Tharu is high, with a percentage of 90.00. In second place is the Bahun Chhetri caste, its a percentage is 6.67. After this, the hill Dalit is 3.33 percent, the minority group is 1.85 percent, and the Madhesi group is 0.93 percent, respectively. Data show unequal representation in Bardiya National Park based on caste/ethnicity.

3.2 Job Description of Phanit Rank

The responsibilities of the elephant handler include the management and control of the assigned elephant, ensuring its safe and efficient handling. The elephant handler is required to provide comprehensive training to maintain full control over the elephants, preventing any disruptive behavior or potential runaway incidents. Additionally, the elephant handler must oversee the well-being of the elephants under their care, ensuring they are adequately fed, watered, and properly maintained. An essential duty of the elephant handler is to conduct thorough inspections of the elephants upon their return from grazing, checking their condition and addressing any concerns or complaints that may arise regarding their health or treatment. This ensures the continued welfare of the elephants and the maintenance of safety standards within the establishment.

3.3 Job Description of Pachhuwa Rank

The focus group discussion highlights the various responsibilities needed in the day-to-day maintenance and management of elephants at the Hattisa. The major responsibilities of Pachhuwa are mentioned in the FGD. Preparation and feeding of Kuchi, which is specially prepared food made by weighing rice, egg, and salt according to a specific scale and feeding them at a specific time, is one of the primary responsibilities. The staff members also make sure to graze the elephants, give them water, bathe them daily, and cut and bring grass and apples for them to feed on. There are regular health checkups in the morning and evening to see if there is any sickness or discomfort. Hygiene is also well maintained, for instance, by washing the elephants' trunks to prevent the accumulation of stool and follow-on health issues. Apart from these duties, workers serve as elephant handlers (Mahuts) when needed and are in charge of the security of domesticated elephants from potential contact with wild elephants. They also conduct training for Mahuts, the fundamental skills of elephant handling and management for general animal and caretaker welfare and security.

3.4 Job Description of the Mahut Rank

The focus group discussion outlines the routine tasks performed by the Mahut Rank in the Hattisar (elephant stable). Their tasks include grazing elephants, providing them with water, bathing them, and cutting and conveying grass to feed them. Kuchi is offered to elephants, which is a composition of food prepared by chopping the ingredients into small pieces and measuring them in terms of each elephant's diet scale. Staff also clean the elephant living quarters daily to discourage the animals from consuming soil and to keep the environment hygienic. Elephant dung is disposed of in special areas. Staff also tie the elephants in their designated positions and perform the task of an elephant handler (Mahout) when necessary. These are required for the daily maintenance of the elephants and their appropriate handling. Mahuts also face some danger and potential injury as an integral part of their routine work. Injuries occur physically due to close contact with elephants by feeding them, bathing them, or binding them, since these animals are likely to respond in unexpected ways. Cutting and handling grass also present opportunities for muscle strain and slipping. Certain health hazards come from contact with animal feces, dirty water, and ground, which can lead to infection or respiratory disorders. Mahouts also need to work under harsh weather conditions and may be faced with wild animals while protecting the elephants. Additionally, the labor intensity of the work can generate pressure, fatigue, and emotional strain.

3.5 Facilities of staff of Hattisar

The staff of Hattisar got the same scale salary under the Nepal Civil Service Act. They have got some ration facilities and dress facilities. They have to get food allowances, like forestry employees. Furthermore, the nature of the job is the residential facilities inside. Office duty is considered a 24-hour duty. The residential characteristic of the job is considered a residential facility. During the duty period, there is no time limitation; they are alerted to an incident, and they should prepare for the work. The food allowance is given differently in each national Park. Food allowance is determined by the price of food according to the district. The number of contract workers is high in Hattisar. Their job prospects are uncertain. It is necessary to make those who have worked for a long time on contract permanent. It also reduces the motivation level of the staff at Hattisar. Legally, the leave facility of Hattisar staff is as provided by the Civil Service Rule, 1993. The staff of Hattisar get the following leave benefits:

Table 3
Salary facilities of the staff of Hattisar

Rank	Starting scale	Grade Rs
Phanit	24,702/-	2 grade per grade Rs.823/-
Pachhuwa	24,702	2 grade per grade Rs.823/-
Mahut	24,702/-	2 grade per grade Rs.823/-

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

In the case of permanent staff of Hattisar, 10 percent of the salary is added by the state and deposited in the treasury fund. Contractual, temporary staff of Hattisar do not get this facility. Permanent, contract, and temporary all get a dearness allowance at the rate of 2000 rupees per month at the same rate. The staff of Hattisar gets a clothing allowance. Each frontline employee gets Rs 15,000 per year as clothing allowance, but other civil employees only get Rs 10,000/-. The staff of Hattisar gets the benefit of a festive allowance. Each staff of Hattisar is entitled to a festival allowance of one month's salary once a year. The staff of Hattisar are arranged to live in the office, even if they are close to home. It falls under regular duty and is considered invalid for leaving the post. The suggestions made during focus group discussions were: there should be an arrangement for more time off, special allowances, and employees should be made to work alternately.

3.6 Leave facilities for the staff of Hattisar

Legally, the leave facility of staff of Hattisar is as provided by the Civil Service Rule, 1993. Civil employees working in offices where services are required on public holidays, such as airports, hospitals, fire departments, post offices, and museums, are entitled to leave of substitution for their work on those days. This leave must be taken in shifts of one month. The staff of Hattisar get leave benefits. The conclusions of the group discussion about this are: There should be an arrangement for more time off and special allowances, and employees should be made to work alternately. The staff of Hattisar should be entitled to leave of substitution for their work on public holidays and festival holidays. There is a situation where the park administration has to manage unlimited working hours by arranging duties in shifts. Since the staff of Hattisar has to work day and night at the work site or away from family without living together, it is necessary to arrange to maintain balance in family life.

3.7 Pension facilities for the staff of Hattisar

The government issued the Pension Fund Act 2075 and implemented a new pension system for civil employees who joined the service on July 1, 2076. The civil employees who joined the service before the implementation of the Act get a pension from the state treasury. After the promulgation of the act, the civil employees who entered the civil service got a monthly pension from the pension fund and not from the state fund. The state deducts 6 percent from the monthly salary of civil employees and adds 6 percent to the pension fund. That means 12 percent of the monthly salary is accumulated in the pension fund. Civil employees who retire with a service period of 20 years or more get a monthly pension from the fund. Family pension: In case of the death of an employee who has completed 20 years of service, his spouse will get fifty percent of the pension amount monthly. The children of the deceased employee receive a family pension until they turn eighteen years old, provided both parents are deceased or remarried. If an employee does not complete the service period of 20 years and is not in service for any reason, he will get the amount, interest, and profit accumulated in his account as a lump sum.

3.8 Insurance of the staff of Hattisar

The Civil Service Act of 2049 mentions insurance benefits for frontline staff. With the permission of the Citizen Investment Fund, the Government of Nepal has been running an insurance fund initiative since 2062–2063. Every government worker will receive Rs. 400 per month from their pay, along with the equivalent amount of the insurance fund, now 400 rupees more in insurance premiums. Death due

to accident: If the death occurs within 183 days of the accident due to direct causes, 10 lakhs will be given. 10,000 rupees will be provided for the funeral management expenses. If the insured employee becomes permanently disabled within 365 days from the date of the accident, he will get compensation of 10 lakhs rupees. 5 lakhs will be given if one eye does not work, so that the vision does not return, and if one ear does not hear so that the hearing does not return.

Table 4

Civil Servants' Group Accident Insurance

Type of damage	Benefit
Death due to an accident	10 Lakh Rupees
Permanent disability	10 Lakh Rupees
If one eye is damaged so as not to to regain sight, and one ear is not able to hear	5 Lakh Rupees
Permanent partial disability	5 Lakh Rupees
If any thumb or index finger does not work	2 Lakh Rupees
Loss of memory power	2 Lakh Rupees
If any other finger of the hand or foot does not work	1 Lakh Rupees
Treatment	1 Lakh Rupees

Source: Civil Servants' Group Accident Insurance Program Operating Procedure 2079.

3.9 Problems faced by the staff of Hattisar

The Hattisars under the Bardiya National Park face significant challenges in managing captive elephants, including inadequate staff quarters, insufficient shelter and fencing for elephants, and poor water and sanitation facilities. These issues strain the workforce and affect elephant welfare. Feeding problems, staff injuries, and a lack of life insurance further complicate the situation. The limited medical facilities and insufficient funds for elephant care, particularly for calves, hinder effective management. Overall, these challenges highlight the need for improved infrastructure, safety measures, and increased funding to support both elephants and staff. There is a decline in the number of skilled laborers available for elephant work. Elephant working skills training facilities are nonexistent in the nation. Due to the specialized skills needed to manage elephants, the park has managed its workforce by providing free training to new hires in Hattisar (Bardiya National Park, 2024). Elephants are used for refueling places where cars cannot go. One of the Hattisar staff said that duty in the forest during the hot sun would cause skin diseases. The following information is found from the FGD: Risk of

flooding and inundation during the rainy season, risk of snake and crocodile attacks during the rainy season, windstorms in February and March will bring down trees and block the road. Injured or killed by trees while walking, getting winter diseases during the cold wave and misty days, the rising temperature during the summer, and extended dry spells cause the drying up of wetlands, leading to health hazards for the staff of Hattisar, and injured or killed by hornets, mosquitoes, or wasp bites.

The risks to the staff of Hattisar (elephant stable) are different. Based on the experience of FGD participants, the risks are as follows: When patrolling and moving the guest, the rope may be pulled, and the seat or the bed may be thrown. It may be a fall from the elephant due to bending or carelessness. It may be shaken and then may fall on the riders. It may fall by hitting the branches of the tree when the elephant runs away. For some reason, the elephant can run away and may go out of control. Elephants can get stuck in swamps or bogs. Wild elephants, rhinoceroses, tigers, bears, and goursds may be chased to the staff of Hattisar. A male elephant may be uncontrol. There may be encounters with wildlife poachers. Natural hazards may be faced, like wind, lightning, floods, forest fires, etc. Elephant-riding persons may be attacked by bees and wasps in shrubs. Dried-out branches of trees can break off and fall, which causes injuries when the wind blows. Potentiality of transmission of skin disease of an elephant to the staff of Hattisar. While collecting grass from trees, there is a risk of falling from the tree. When the elephant runs away, its legs get tangled in the trunk, and it hangs itself. If the runaway elephant falls into the bush, it falls, and the riding person falls. The cutting grass is loaded on the elephant, when the rope is pulled, the rope will fall to the ground and the loader will fall on earth. The staff of Hattisar are facing problems due to inadequate infrastructure facilities in some elephant stables (Hattisar), like staff quarters, shed houses, grain storehouses, water storage facilities, etc. Shortage of natural food, fodder, and water during the dry season. The staff of Hattisar are facing the problem of managing the feeding material and grazing. The staff of Hattisar are non-permanent (Contract staff). They have fewer amenities than permanent workers in the same position. Insecure boundaries of the Hattisar compound from the wild elephant attack. The appointment of the employees as per the approved vacant posts could not be fulfilled. With the increase in the number of elephants, there is no increase in the number of vacant posts

4. Conclusion

The staff of Hattisar at the Bardiya National Park faces challenges. The staff of Hattisar is dominated by male staff, underrepresentation of whom, particularly at main ranks like Phanit, Pachhuwa, and Mahut, is prevalent. From the ethnic perspective, most of the staff is made up of

Tharu indigenous people, accounting for 90% of Hattisar's staff, while other caste groups contribute marginally. The staff of Hattisar runs considerable risks from wildlife encounters with wild elephants, rhinos, and tigers, among others; natural hazards like floods and forest fires; and occupational accidents involving elephant handling. Very inadequate safety equipment and training add to these risks. Low remuneration and poor benefits: Though frontline staff receive salaries, there are concerns about very low pay scales, no special allowances like lunch allowances during long patrols, poor food allowance, and discrimination when compared with permanent staff. There is also a serious concern regarding a lack of proper work-life balance, as the duties are 24/7. Many roles have huge gender imbalances, with some roles dominated by men. Wild elephants can easily enter the compound as there are no secure boundaries. The workers are subjected to various work-related risks, such as the risk of being injured by elephants, wildlife attacks, natural calamities like floods and storms, and health hazards due to adverse weather conditions. Apart from physical risks, the staff of Hattisars are subject to issues related to inadequate infrastructure, limited food and water supply, and handling of non-permanent (contract) workers with lower benefits compared to permanent workers.

Despite these issues, Hattisar employees are provided with some perks such as salary, allowances, insurance, and pension plans. There are also requests for improved working conditions, e.g., substitution leave, special allowances, and work-life balance assistance. Also, the issues of contract staffing and a lack of proper employees to accommodate the growing number of elephants in Hattisar. Infrastructure upgrades and improvements of working conditions of the workers further enhanced efficiency and morale among the working staff of Hattisar. Provisions should be made for making permanent employees who are currently working on contract.

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