
The Collapse of India's Ivory Industry

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For over 2,000 years Indian traders legally imported ivory from East Africa - until January 1990. They had been among the largest ivory importers and manufacturers in the world until independence in 1947. In order to increase revenue at that time, the new government introduced import duties on ivory, duties which gradually increased, causing a slow decline in the ivory industry. Annual average imports fell from 246 tonnes in the late 1940s to only 13 tonnes in the mid-1980s. By the late 1980s there were severe regulations on the trade: everyone involved needed an annual licence and had to submit monthly returns to India's CITES Management Authority with full details of their ivory stocks. It was this added paperwork and harassment that drove illiterate craftsmen away from the trade, not to mention ivory shortages and higher prices. In 1978 there had been about 7,200 ivory carvers but by early 1989 nearly three-quarters of them had deserted the craft.

During 1989 came the international outcry against ivory trading, followed by a world-wide reaction. Kenya and Tanzania banned ivory exports. Worked ivory was made a prohibited import in North America, Western Europe and Japan. The new CITES restrictions came into force, stopping all commercial ivory trading between member states, except for the few countries which took out reservations.

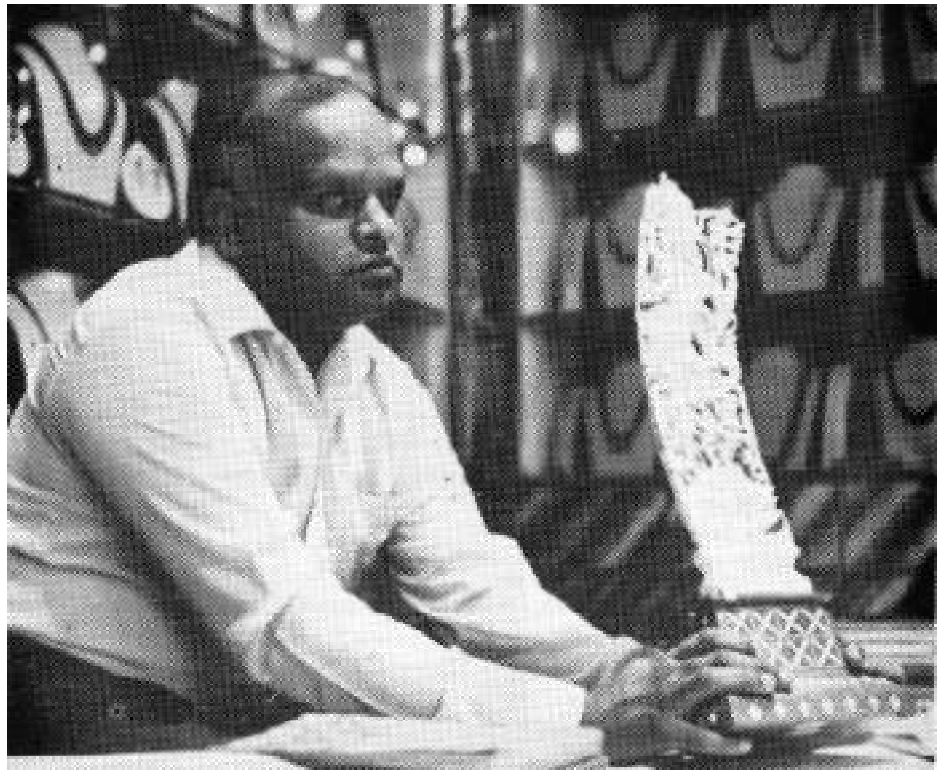
As a result, in 1989 Indian traders imported 6,763 kilos of raw ivory and legally exported a mere 590 kilos of carved ivory; they could find very few wholesale markets for their exports. From 18 January 1990, all imports were banned. The price of raw ivory in India at that time was US\$200 a kilo, 15% less than the previous year. Dealers simply saw no point in buying it. In order to help carvers and traders dispose of their stocks, the new Indian government submitted to CITES a reservation which would have allowed exports for six months more. However, the document arrived at the CITES headquarters in Switzerland a few days after the final date of 18 January 1990 and therefore the reservation could not be granted. In fact it takes many years to sell large ivory carvings, so a few extra months would not have greatly helped the dealers.

During 1989 over half of the remaining ivory craftsmen changed jobs or were made redundant. Some have turned to carving wood, but the pay is around half that for working ivory. There are no major re-training schemes, so the carvers have little opportunity of starting new careers. In contrast, the rich ivory dealers did not suffer financially. They simply turned their attention to other handicrafts and are selling

brassware, carpets, embroidery, jewellery, silks, silver and wood carvings very successfully. Ivory carvings are still on display as the domestic market remains legal. Since September 1989, however, retail sales have fallen by 85%. Negative publicity and international trade bans have worked; foreign tourists no longer want or dare to buy ivory except perhaps for tiny pieces of jewellery and miniature paintings on ivory which are easily hidden.

Dealers have not reduced their prices, as they realize that high costs are not the reason for the decline in sales. Only a few rich Indians choose to purchase ivory carvings for decoration or worship, preferring statues of Hindu gods and goddesses. So dealers envisage having to put many of their large ivory pieces, which they will not be able sell, into their own little family museums, but they are mostly rich enough to indulge in this. It is the ivory craftsmen in India who are distraught; they can only hope that some trade will re-open after the next CITES conference in 1992.

The international ivory ban has been extremely successful at crippling the ivory industry in India but not in reducing the price of raw ivory. The big question which remains is whether the collapse of the ivory industry in Asia will in time be reflected in the price of ivory and what effect this will have on African elephants and poaching. This important question must be addressed before the success of the ivory trade bans can be fully judged, and the answer must deeply affect future decisions on the world ivory trade.



Salesmen in India are depressed that during the last few months they have been unable to sell their ivory carvings