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The blind men and the elephant: reflections on captive elephant management in Kerala, southern India

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Abstract: Elephants, as living forms of the elephant-headed god *Ganesha*, have been revered across south Asia, particularly India, where they have served humanity in various ways, ranging from battlefields to temples, over generations, across centuries. In the southern Indian state of Kerala, these animals have been symbols of aristocracy, wherein the elite class reared elephants, tuskers in particular, for their aesthetic value and as symbols of their own social status. They have also played a crucial role in temple festivities as the holy idol-bearers in most pageantries across the state. Over the years, however, the status of elephants has degenerated, and they are now widely exploited as money-spinners, with increasing commercial interests largely ignoring their wellbeing. Increased workloads and unprecedented conflict incidents are now commonplace, stark evidence of the overall decline in their welfare standards in captivity. Through an analysis of historic practices and empirical information on the current conundrums facing the captive Asian elephant, this essay suggests plausible management reforms that could be implemented to ensure the long-term survival of the species and the sustenance of the once-unique human–elephant relationship in Kerala. We also emphasise the importance of a holistic approach in understanding and mitigating the immediate problems facing the captive elephant and its human communities, rather than replicating the blinding, piecemeal actions akin to those of the six proverbial men and their elephant.

Prologue

India has had a long cultural association, since time immemorial, with the Asian elephant, both in captivity and in the wild, with ancient inscriptions, sculpture and scriptures standing testimony to this relationship across the Indian subcontinent (Sukumar 2003). With the exception of nonhuman primates, elephants possibly represent the only wild, yet undomesticated, species that have shared such close social bonds with humans since historic times. Elephants have been in captivity across Asia over thousands of years, the earliest evidence stemming from the Mauryan Empire, 322–185 BCE (Sukumar 2003). The extensive and specific use of elephants in the battlefield and for draught purposes have historically been documented and depicted in textual records, paintings and inscriptions (Sukumar 2011; Trautmann 2015), not forgetting a great variety of textbooks that have discussed the biology, welfare and management of captive elephant populations in more recent times. Now spread across zoos, camps, temples and rehabilitation centres across the globe, captive Asian elephants continue to be mostly concentrated in India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Nepal and Cambodia, of which India holds a fairly large population of c. 3,500 individuals, equivalent to about 15% of the global wild population of the species (Bist 2002).

In India, particularly in southern India, elephants have traditionally been used for draught purposes, such as transporting huge boulders to construction sites, logging and for drawing large sums of water from nearest sources to temples (Vijayakrishnan 2015a). Gradually, machines replaced heavy manual labour and the working elephants were brought into temples, mainly across south and central Kerala, not only becoming

important religious icons but also idol-bearers in virtually all religious processions (Vijayakrishnan and Sinha 2019). The religious role of elephants can largely be attributed to the worship of the elephant-headed god *Ganesha*, who, as traditionally believed in Hindu mythology, is the remover of all obstacles (see also Locke 2013) and this reverence has indeed stood the elephant in good stead, helping in its wellbeing and conservation, at least during earlier, more reverential, times. With the passage of time, however, most temple festivals have become huge pageantries of pomp and show, vying with one another for status, mainly in terms of the numbers of elephants, particularly tuskers, parading in them; such temples can now often be mistaken for mere bull elephant congregation sites!

The aesthetic appeal of tuskers has led, in the course of time, to a heightened demand for their service and the subsequent inflow of such individuals from other parts of the country. The population of tuskers found in Kerala today thus includes a large number of individuals brought from the northern and northeastern states of Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and even from the far-flung Andaman and Nicobar Islands of the Bay of Bengal. Such augmented employment of elephants in pageantries and a stark increase in the number of pageantries themselves have led to a crass commercialisation of these religious festivals and the use of individual elephants, and thence to a deplorable neglect of their welfare and management (Vijayakrishnan and Sinha 2019). This rapid degeneration of the values with which elephants were once maintained as members of the family in private homes has now, therefore, not only led to an increase in the workload of elephants but, more crucially, to intense conflict in captivity and an unprecedented escalation of stress-related ailments and mortality in captive elephants. In this chapter, we attempt to understand the nuances of captive elephant management in the state of Kerala, report on the prevalent elephant-human conflict in captivity – a phenomenon seldom discussed in the broader light of human–animal conflict – and reflect on the possible management strategies that could significantly improve elephant wellbeing and welfare under captive conditions.

Welfare of the wild

> *van'yāstatra sukhēāṣitā vidhi vaśād*
> *grāmāvatīrṇā gajā*
> *bad'dhāsatīkṣṇakaṭugravāgbhiratiśug*
> *bhīmēāhabandhādibhi:*
> *udvignāśca mana: śarīrajanitair*
> *duḥkhairatīvākṣamā:*
> *prāṇān dhārayituṁ ciraṁ naravaśaṁ*
> *prāpta: svayūthādatha*
>
> "Elephants, who have lived happily in the forests but have now been brought from their own herds to the village, in bonds, under the control of men, have to suffer harsh, bitter, cruel words; excessive grief, fear, bewilderment and bondage; sufferings of mind and body; until they are unable to sustain life for long…"
>
> *Matangalila, 11:1*
> (Edgerton 1931; Namboothiri 2009; our translation)

The eleventh chapter of the magnum opus, *Matangalila* discusses the trauma that individual elephants undergo when caught from the wild, separated from their herds and taken to captivity. It then goes on to describe the methods by which one needs to take care of these individuals to reduce their pain, ensure their welfare and avoid any potential fatality. In southern India, where most elephants came or continue to come from wild-caught sources, this traditional wisdom is of particular relevance in the management of traumatised individuals. There have been later writings that have speculated on the emotions and thoughts of wild-bereaved tuskers, subjugated, used by humans, their past experiences of wilderness haunting them, their imagination running wild.[1]

War animals of the historic past, elephants later went on to become symbols of pride and pomp in the backyards of the *Raja*s and the *Sahib*s of Kerala. Most affluent families of

this state had dozens of elephants, often caught from privately owned forestlands, the royal family of the Nilambur *Raja*s and Koyappathodi *Haji*s of erstwhile Malabar of the late 19th and early 20th centuries being classic exemplars (Daniel 1998; Vijayakrishnan 2015b; *Fig.*1 below). It is noteworthy that while, in those times, the emphasis was primarily on the aesthetic value of the pageantries, the welfare of the individual animals was never overlooked. Much attention was also paid to each and every elephant–mahout relationship in every family; these often lasted over lifetimes, till the death of either of the two individuals. This is in stark contrast to the practices of today, in which commercial interests run supreme, overriding the carefully cultivated relationships, shaped by affection and a sense of wellbeing for the elephant, of the past.

Celebrity tuskers and the social media

Although the recent past has witnessed splendidly anthropomorphised tales of tuskers of the yesteryears in Malayalam books, films, and songs, there never has been fanfare of the kind that surrounds the elephant as it does today. With the particular advent of television programmes that portray tuskers as celebrities, the elephant management sector has experienced an overwhelming increase in fanatic public devotion to certain individual elephants in the form of social media pages, felicitation events, fan wars and variously heightened commercial demands. Contrary to expectations over the last decade that this increase in the number of self-proclaimed elephant lovers would spell a greater concern for elephant welfare, the situation has actually worsened with all energies being diverted to arguments, petty debates, ego clashes and cold wars, occasionally even taking the form of antagonistic hoardings and slogans, social media wars and even, rarely, physical fistfights. The wellbeing of the elephants has, of course, been forgotten amidst these battles; on the contrary, there have been negative effects on the daily lives of the elephants and their mahouts, primarily in the form of increasing work pressures and often-negative scrutiny of their performance. Certain unwarranted events, such as 'head-lifting' competitions have also been promoted, occasionally negatively affecting the normal behaviour of the individuals involved (Vijayakrishnan and Sinha 2019). Most difficult of all, these pressures have often culminated in unpredictability of behaviours displayed by these elephants; the virtual wars on the social media pages of the tuskers and their mahouts then spill onto the festival grounds, especially in the physical presence of a boisterous public.

Analysing captive conundrums on the ground

We assessed the recent trajectories of the captive elephant management programmes in the state of Kerala through analyses of historic literature, contemporary news articles, social media reports, and our own on-ground field observations. Kerala holds one of the largest populations of captive male Asian elephants that have been used for commercial purposes, anywhere in the distribution range of the species. Our records of the last festival season in 2018–2019 indicate that there are currently 505 elephants in captivity, of which 408 are males and 97 females, with a male-skewed sex ratio of 4:1.

The major proportion of these individuals are wild-caught, with the current population comprising mostly individuals brought from the northern and northeastern parts of the country, only to be used in various religious and cultural, as well as in timber-hauling activities. The tuskers in the state are managed under different regimes, including temples, private individuals and state Forest Department camps, of which the majority are in temples or in the private possession of individual citizens. These animals are, of course, regularly used for pageantries on a daily basis, especially during the festival season, between September and May every year (*Fig.* 2).

Data on captive elephants were obtained through field surveys and, in order to maximise sampling effort, a wide informant network, spread across central Kerala, was created. This network largely consisted of people closely associated with elephants or with their management, including mahouts, owners, and festival coordination committee members as well as interested members of the public. Data on the movement of elephants, usually by trucks, were obtained on five randomly selected tuskers – the number of individuals

being limited by logistic constraints – on a daily basis over a period of sixty days, between December 2015 and February 2016, during the peak festival season in Kerala.

Figure 1: Elephant capture using the pit-capture method, with the support of trained *koonkie* elephants. Photo: Nilambur Kovilakam Archives

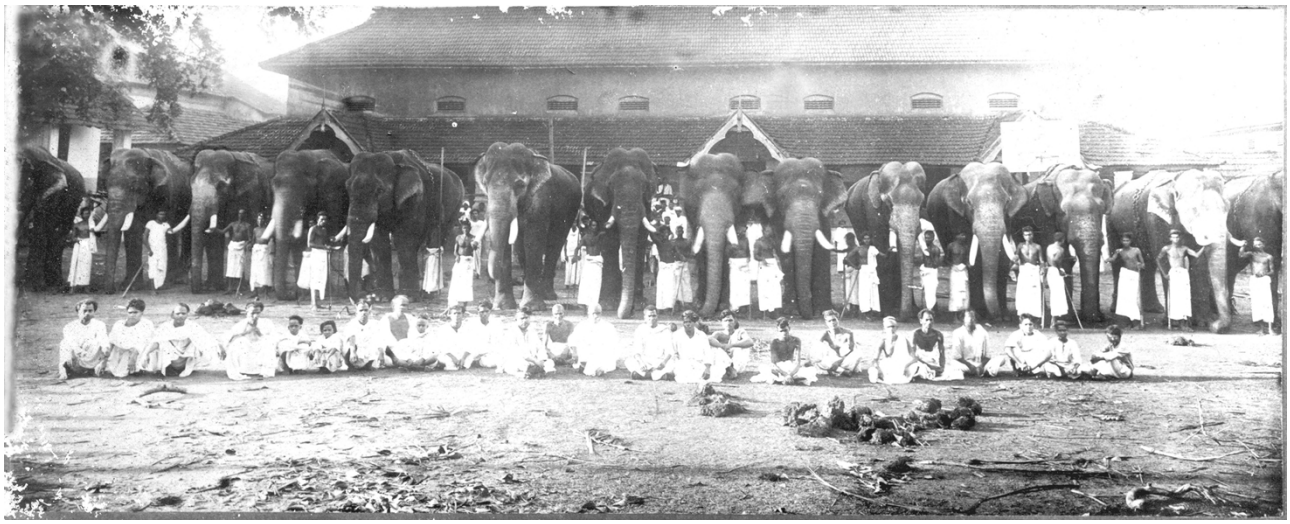

Figure 2: Thrissur Pooram, one of the most important festivals of Kerala, in 1931. Photo: Cochin Royal Family Archives

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The daily locations of the selected tuskers were recorded and the distance that they were moved, on an average day of the festival season, was calculated. Although we were unable to carry out our observations over the entire festival season due to excessive logistic demands, it is imperative that one studies, for the purpose of devising elephant management and welfare strategies, the total distance that a bull elephant is transported

over an entire festival season and finally ascertain what we term the *work range*, or the net geographical area over which a tusker is deployed as a performer or idol-bearer during the annual religious festivities of the state.

Of the five tuskers that we studied, RJP was made to travel an average of 104.96 (± 31.85) km per day, followed by KDC: 82.24 (± 21.78) km and KGP: 67.15 (± 17.41) km. Individuals SSD (37.85 ± 10.75 km) and CST (29.18 ± 8.99 km) were shuttled the least, their travelling being restricted mostly within native and neighbouring district limits.

Unlike in the earlier days, when elephants would walk, along with their mahouts, from one festival point to another, taking multiple rest-stops, they are, today, made to travel the length and breadth of the state in trucks. This has begun to significantly affect their health by cutting down on the minimal physical exercise that elephants typically require for the maintenance of their body condition. An increasing number of impaction cases are being recorded, perhaps due to a combination of lack of exercise, extensive workloads and monotonous diets, aggravated by events such as transportation by trucks, which has earlier been shown to generate physiological stress in elephants (Laws et al. 2007). These factors need to be taken into account when planning for elephant welfare and management in the state, but they seldom are. We observed RJP to be one of the most popular tuskers in Kerala and to suffer the greatest work pressure amongst the privately managed captive elephants in the state, partly driven by the huge publicity that he has attracted in social media. This is also borne out by the rather large average daily distance travelled by him during our sampling period. Elephant captures from the wild have been banned in the state in the early 1970s, the import of elephants from other states prevented by a court order in 2008, and a relatively recent ban has been imposed by the state of Bihar in northern India, from 2015 onwards, on the sale of elephants in the famous Sonepur Mela, an annual animal fair that has been believed to be the source of virtually all the captive elephants in Kerala (*Fig.* 3). The existing stock of individuals in Kerala is, therefore, now under increasing pressure to meet the rising demands of pageantries. This would, rather unfortunately, mean a further increase in the average workload of captive elephants and their associated stress in the coming years. There is thus an urgent need for immediate policy-level interventions and a stricter enforcement of the captive elephant management rules[2] that have been framed to regulate the different human-driven activities affecting the welfare and individual wellbeing of captive elephants in the state.

Conflict in captivity

Data on human attacks by elephants were collected and compiled with the help of field volunteers. Such information was crosschecked with that collected from newspapers and social media that appeared on the same or subsequent days. For each incident, the following information were recorded: date and location of the attack; identity of the elephant; nature of damage, classified as property damage, human injuries, elephant injuries or human deaths; mode of subsequent control of the individual, including the use of tranquiliser darts or by mahouts; and the occasion, including festivals, timber logging or travel. The circumstances of these incidents were ascertained, as precisely as possible, from news reports, discussions with mahouts of the involved elephants and through video-records, wherever available. A total of 125 human attacks by elephants were recorded during an 18-month period between September 2014 and March 2016 across the state (*Fig.* 4). Most of these incidents were concentrated around central Kerala, corresponding to the relatively high number of pageantries in the region. We also recorded one incident in the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu, where a tusker from Kerala ran amok after being taken there for a festival.

It is perhaps noteworthy that, of the 125 reported incidents, elephants with previous histories of aggression towards humans were responsible for 101 attacks. In 19 of these cases, some provocation by the mahout or by a bystander was observed while, in 26 cases, firecrackers or other loud noise appeared to trigger the incident. Several individuals were in various stages of *musth*[3] at the time of the attack and this may have been a contributory cause. It should also be pointed out that, in 16 of these cases, the elephants were brought under control using tranquiliser darts.

Figure 3: An elephant being loaded onto a truck to be transported from the Sonepur Mela to Kerala, c. 1990. Photo: Kirangat Vasudevan Namboothiri

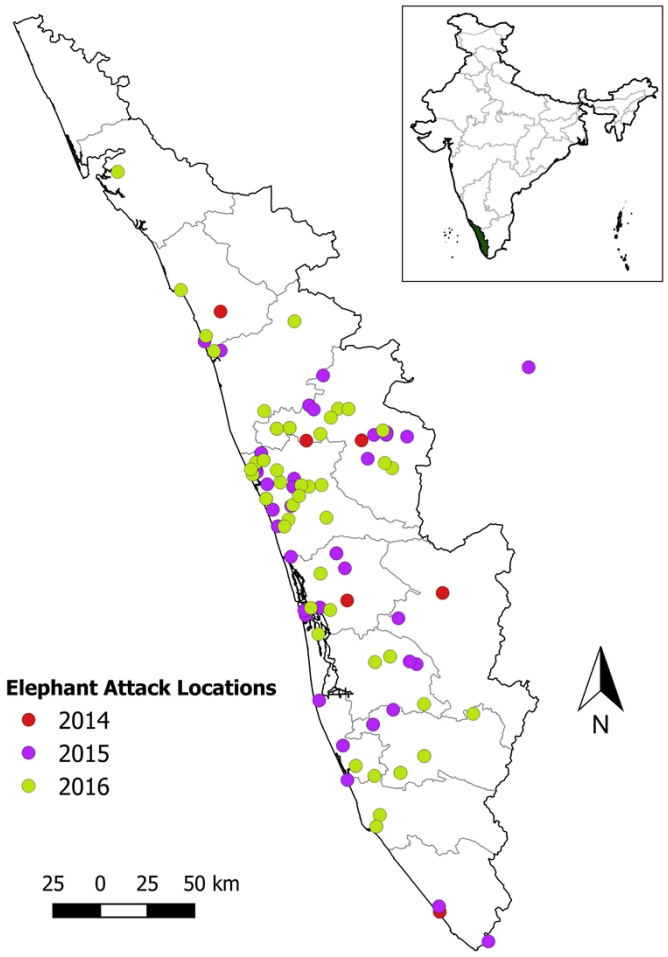

Figure 4: Geographic locations of attack incidents on humans by captive elephants, during the festival seasons of 2014-2016 in the southern Indian state of Kerala

The observed patterns of conflict incidents point to the urgent need to develop individual elephant databases by various enforcement agencies and to score for their previous histories, before imposing restrictions on individuals that have earlier or repeatedly caused problems. Individual idiosyncrasies should thus be taken into consideration when choosing to locate elephants in crowded places, in order to avoid potential accidents. Such a database could also keep track of the work schedules of individual elephants and thus meaningfully aid in the consideration of specific restrictions, particularly in terms of their working days and distances travelled. Laws et al. (2007), in their paper on transport-related stress in elephants, indicate the significant levels of physiological stress exhibited by elephants during and following transportation, a matter of serious concern, as regular travel to festivals could jeopardise their long-term survival and wellbeing.

Conflict in captivity is seldom acknowledged, and its socioeconomic costs relatively unexplored. We suggest, therefore, an immediate and thorough analysis of the spatiotemporal patterns of captive elephant-human conflict, the circumstances of each incident, and the costs incurred, so as to protect the lives and wellbeing of these elephants and their caregivers. It is perhaps ironic that while wild elephants pay a huge toll for the minimal damage that they may cause in the form of crop damage or episodic human casualties, the welfare of their captive counterparts and their handlers, so close to home, seem not to be affected at all by waves of public protest against their poor management and the resulting conflict (Vijayakrishnan 2016). A close scrutiny of the prevailing policies governing captive elephant management and a consideration of certain necessary changes in them are, undoubtedly, an imperative need of the hour.

Towards tougher days and a nearing end

The portrayal of elephants as commodities has existed from the days of the *Arthashastra*, the ancient Indian Sanskrit treatise on statecraft, economic policy and military strategy, believed to have been written by Kautilya in the 3rd century BCE, where he describes the royal elephants in the context of their use in battlefields. Interestingly, the author then emphasises the importance of protecting the species, for which the state needed to create, what he called, the *Gajavana* or Elephant Forests, wherein attention would be given to the welfare of the animals. Although this proclamation could arguably be the first of its kind, anywhere in the world, to set up areas dedicated to the protection of a particular species of wildlife, in this case the elephant, it is tragic that any such consideration of the protection and wellbeing of captive elephants appears to be eroding rapidly in today's India, although they continue to be treated as commodities and subject to rampant commercial exploitation.

The traditional pride factor of having elephants in one's courtyard in Kerala (*Fig.* 5) has thus now gradually been replaced by considerations of their monetary value, while the pomp and grandeur typically associated with them has given way to the affluence of their owners. The Sonepur Mela—an annual cattle fair in the northern Indian state of Bihar, referred to above—from where elephants have been regularly traded in large numbers since the late 1970s, fuelled the rising needs for more elephants in Kerala, until different government-run establishments officially banned the legal sale and capture of elephants for commercial purposes (Cheeran 2012). Hundreds of elephants, crossing interstate boundaries, reached down south to Kerala from the northern and northeastern Indian states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Bihar, till the late 2000s, multiplying the monetary transactions around these animals. These mass movements also followed the ban on logging in Assam, which had rendered hundreds of elephants *jobless*. The elephants, sold at low prices in the northern parts of the country, fetched much higher returns in Kerala, making such transactions highly profitable, and with increasing demands year after year, greater numbers of wild elephants were caught and exploited across the state. The current population of tuskers in Kerala are an unfortunate legacy of the large-scale transactions that happened in the 1990s and 2000s, with c. 80% of the tuskers in the state originating from the Himalayan foothills or the northeastern states. This historic influx of elephants led to a further mushrooming of newer pageantries, and this was invariably accompanied by a deplorable decline in the welfare of these performing individuals.

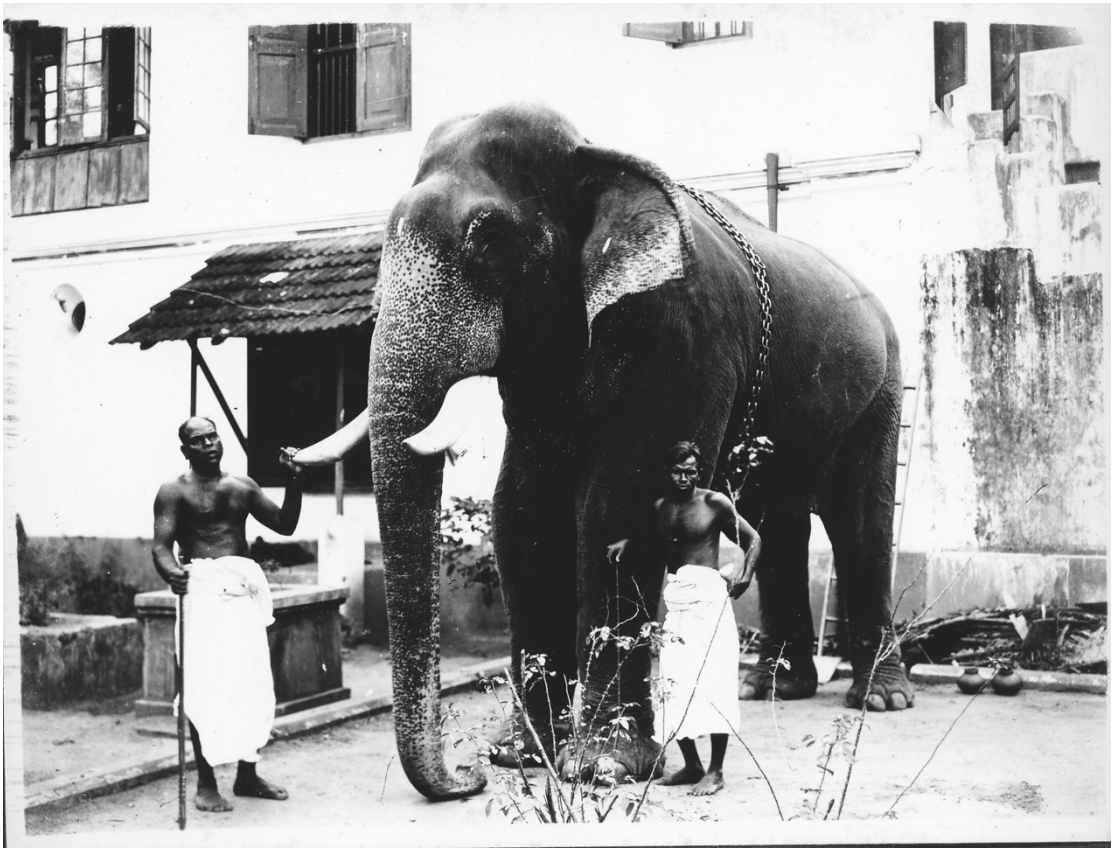

Figure 5: The famous tusker, Kutalattupuram Ramachandran, with his mahout and kavadi. This elephant-mahout duo has been celebrated in the elephant lore of the 1900s as a classic example of elephant–mahout relationship. Ramachandran is also an exemplar of the majestic elephants kept as symbols of pride and aristocracy. Photo: Late Krishna Rao, courtesy Prasanth Varma

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To curb large-scale illegal trade in elephants in India, several restrictions have now been put in place, including a ban on their display, sale, and transport to and from the Sonepur Mela. This restriction has attracted considerable attention in the regional and national dailies across the country but there have also been tremendous protests to revoke the ban and to allow the free sale and transport of elephants at the fair. These various restrictions have been imposed in the light of increased mortality amongst captive elephants across the country, but especially in Kerala, several of which have been due to the lack of proper welfare measures, thus leading to a severe decline in their numbers. While emphasis clearly needs to be laid on achieving better welfare standards for the existing stocks of captive elephants to ensure their long-term survival, there, unfortunately, continues to be a serious exploitation of these individuals to maximise monetary benefits from them until their deaths, as also insidious attempts to procure more elephants and bring them into captivity.

Serious attention also needs to be paid to the increasing work stress faced by elephants, which has led to their heightened mortalities, several of them in their prime. At a rate of about twenty deaths annually, Kerala's captive elephants are declining in a way that is unprecedented. Bulls are losing their lives to impaction, foot rot and other diseases, most of which can be attributed to their high workload, stress and an abominable lack of rest and care. Contrary to the past era, the death of every elephant is 'celebrated' through virtual funerals in social media, many of these wiped out from public attention the same evening that the animal lost its battle for survival. Most deaths are seldom assessed in detail, their perfunctory post-mortem investigations often only casually revealing the cause of death. The circumstances surrounding these deaths or how they could have been avoided are questions that need to be asked urgently, however, if we are to ensure the long-term survival of our last captive elephants.

In conclusion, we must begin to urgently acknowledge the elephant in the room and make sincere attempts to improve captive elephant management practices in Kerala. Elephants have been utilised throughout the ages in religious, cultural as well as commercial activities as beasts of burden but are now increasingly being subjected to ruthless commercial transactions. The current management regimes urgently need to emphasise welfare requirements while ensuring that the socioeconomic aspects of elephant employment are addressed in a balanced manner. In simpler terms, it has to become humane and ethical, while being practical. Global debates and outcries are demanding a closure of all captive elephant establishments and the movement of individual elephants to rehabilitation centres. Several such campaigns have, however, failed in Kerala, owing to lack of support on the ground, primarily because they carry often-unclear, emotional arguments, rarely backed by science and practical socioeconomic considerations. Given the current numbers of captive elephants in countries like India, it is also logistically challenging to relocate all of them to rehabilitation centres, particularly given its financial implications as well as the manpower, space and other resource requirements that the government agencies would need to negotiate in implementing such a move. Moreover, the close entanglement of elephants with different pageantries that are integral to the cultural fabric of current-day Kerala has a strong influence on any reform action that needs to be implemented over the short term. These uncertainties also seem to have contributed to the apparent failure of legal battles to further the cause of captive elephant rehabilitation in the state.

The current practices thus need to be changed slowly, with public participation, based on the ground realities, backed by scientific rigour, and without stirring up any sociopolitical unrest. We need to begin by arresting the further influx of elephants into captivity, followed by a progressive transformation of the system with enforcement of humane and ethical treatment of all captive individuals, coupled with the introduction of awareness programmes that would sensitise society to a gradual phase-out of elephant pageantries. More importantly, stricter enforcement on the commercialisation of elephants in the form of lending them out for large rental or lease amounts should be curtailed; this, by itself, will eventually bring down all incidental maltreatment of the animals.

These practices should possibly be coupled with small-scale rehabilitation efforts by the state Forest Department, wherein aged, diseased, and debilitated animals could be moved to government-run establishments for better attention and care, and their deployment at worksites restricted. The retirement age of captive elephants currently exists only on paper, and there are no restrictions on using aged animals in processions; this needs to be rectified immediately.

Afterword

Elephants have always formed a quintessential part of the cultural history of the state of Kerala, the Indian subcontinent, and sections of southeastern and eastern Asia. From poets to scholars to the public, ancient or modern – all have celebrated the enigma of the elephant, but with an occasional change from admiration to a celebration of our domination over the largest, extant land mammal. This chapter attempted to draw a partial trajectory of the species in captivity: its glorious past, its current exploitation and the management conundrums it faces today and the possible ways forward in the light of an uncertain, dark future. Categorised as a Schedule I species[4] by the Wildlife Protection Act (1972) of the Government of India and as an Endangered species by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, the Asian elephant's existence is severely threatened in the wild across its range, illegal captivity being one of the major threats. The levels of protection that elephants currently enjoy typically remain in print and require stricter enforcement in order to ensure their long-term survival. The uncertainty that lurks in the lives of captive elephants can only possibly be removed by an overarching approach that would encompass conflict mitigation, welfare assurance for both elephants and their mahouts, and the long-term sustenance of the lives and wellbeing of those currently in our power. With changing practices in captive elephant management, our elephants and their dependent human communities are traversing a

difficult path, tossed by waves of commercialisation, a slow fading into the dark. We must act immediately to bring back the almost forgotten hope and the glory.

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NOTES

1. *sañcarikkukayāṇās'sāhasi, saṅkalpattil*
   van cevikaḷāṁ puḷḷisvātantrya patraṁ vīśi

   The adventurer is travelling in his imagination
   Fanning the dotted flags of liberty, his massive ears

Vailoppilli Sreedhara Menon, *Sahyante Makan / Son of Sahyadri* (1947), translated by Prasanna Varma

2. The *Captive Elephant Management Rules* were framed by the Kerala Forest and Wildlife Department in 2003, with a vision of betterment of elephant lives in captivity, and were later amended in 2012. These rules form the basis of legal monitoring of captive elephant establishments and processions in the state.

3. *Musth* is a physiological phenomenon characterised by heightened levels of testosterone and often manifested in the form of aggressive or dominance displays (Jainudeen et al. 1972).

4. This is the highest level of protection accorded to any species by the Wildlife Protection Act, enacted in 1972 by the Government of India.

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