

Elephant Behaviour in the Night According to Sage Palakapya

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Introduction

Since ancient times, elephants have played a prominent role in the life of humans and have been venerated in India. Elephants have fascinated humans for millennia and a vast literature related to their characteristics, diseases and their treatment were developed in eastern cultures. Elephantology developed into a branch of science related to governance in ancient India and many early works on statecraft devote chapters to it. Indian poets have described the behaviour of elephants in many of their works. Maharshi Pālākāpya's treatise titled the 'Hastyāyurveda' is an elaborate text in the form of a discourse dealing extensively with elephant diseases and their remedies (Sharma 1894a). It runs to about 20,000 or more verses.

Most texts attribute the initiation of elephantology to the Sage Pālākāpya (Harbola 2003). Apart from him, among the other ancient authorities referred to are Vīrasena, Br̥haspati, Nīlakaṇṭha, Vyāsa, Nārada, Rājaputra and Vaiśampāyana. Several such treatises have been briefly discussed in recent publications (Bhattacharya & Gondekar 1924; Cheeran 2013; Sheshadri, 2014).

Here I present gleanings from the 'Hastyāyurveda' text, about night time elephant behaviour and certain pacificatory rituals and remedies for disturbances caused in the night.

Night time behaviour of elephants

Although daytime behaviour of elephants is elaborately described by ancient texts, nocturnal behaviour is less discussed. Elephants venture out from the forests to raid crops at night, all over the world. Nocturnal movements of elephants in some African countries have been reported to be

associated with the phase of the moon. (Barnes 2013). The behaviour of Asian elephants at night is referred to by sage Pālākāpya in his treatise. The 'Hastyāyurveda' [Kṣudra Roga Sthāna - section on Minor diseases, Chap. 43] mentions that as the age of an elephant increases it experiences more Vāta, Kapha and Pitta disorders (Sharma 1894b). As a remedial measure it must be given a suitable place, grape juice, barley, milk and gruel. The sleeping place must be made soft and its movement there must be made easy.

The R̥tucaryādhyāya section [Chap. XV] of the text while describing the nursing of elephants during six seasons, states that during autumn, elephants must be made to sleep in a cool place under moon rays at night (Sharma 1894c). During the rainy season, it advocates that stables of elephants must be smoked with suitable incense to reduce pests at night. Night sleep for the rainy and cold seasons is for about 8 Nālikas (a Nālīka is equivalent to about 60 minutes). The Akṣi Rogādhyāya of the first section [Chap. 18] mentions that sleeplessness in the night causes eye diseases like Nāyamprekṣi in elephants (Sharma 1894d) leading to headache, blurring vision and pain in the eyes. The text then describes an elaborate herbal mixture that is ground into a paste in milk, curd and butter followed by sprinkling over the eyes periodically as well as anointing the eyes as a collyrium (Añjana).

The Rātrikṣiptādhyāya [Chap. 47] states that insanity in elephants is caused by sleeping in wrong places. If an elephant being disturbed at night travels everywhere and hits its tusks against trees or walls, then its eyes get swollen and it suffers from diseases (Sharma 1894e). Likewise an elephant sleeping in cremation grounds or in the middle of four crossroads, or places that are not mind-pleasing and un-prescribed by

ancient scriptures, passes out urine aggravated by doṣas and suffers insanity. The text states that an elephant also suffers from insanity when being awake or when asleep while resting at the bottom of Chaityas (or shrines), when it tries to capture its reflection in waters sensing it as an opponent, if constantly being goaded by a staff or Aṅkuśa (sharp tool used in handling elephants), by seeing fiery substances or on being hurt by another elephant.

Conditions of an elephant afflicted by insanity

Sage Pālakāpya deals extensively with the condition of elephants deprived of sleep due to insanity. He states that such elephants give up all food, their strength is lost and they keep awake at night and sleep in the morning. Saliva oozes from their mouths, the eyes turn red and they always vomit. The skin and other body parts begin to smell. The elephants swoon and sometimes open their eyes in the night.

Medication of disease

The ‘Hastyāyurveda’ mentions the medical treatment of such insanity diseases of elephants as a list of herbs to be mixed with clarified butter and medicated oils and administered as mentioned in the text. Some of these herbs are used in collyriums that are anointed over eyes and to make incense sticks that are waved around in twilight periods.

Sacrificial pacificatory ceremonies for elephants

The text advocates the performance of Rākṣoghna (a sacrifice performed at night to appease spirits that trouble an elephant), secret food eating (Guptabhojana) and performing ‘Bali’ (offerings to spirits) as stated in the text. Charmed talismans are to be tied by medical practitioners on elephant’s head, tusks and other parts. One must anoint the elephant’s forehead with sandalwood, while waving incense; flowers, gems, beads, fruits should be offered together with milk, honey, clarified butter, curd and wine as *Bali* to the spirits all around the dwelling place of the elephant. Sacred water filled pots (Kalaśas) that

are charmed by Vedic hymns seeking protection for the elephant from various deities, heavenly beings like Devas, Yakṣas Navagrahas, ṛṣis, Forest deities, Asterisms, Herbs, Mountains, Rākṣasas, Sarpas (serpents), Piśachas and Dānavas are to be taken in circumambulation around the elephant (Sharma 1894f). One must thus perform the Rākṣoghna and offer sacrificial cakes and feast to the elephants [Gaja Śānti].

Performances of such rites at night around the dwelling place of an elephant suffering from insanity and other diseases remove the evil effects caused by spirits. Sage Pālakāpya also adds that elephants are to be anointed with warm mustard oil or massaged with oil mixed with urine of an ass, chameleon (Godha) or sheep (Basta). A mixture of hairs of elephant, monkey, sheep and cow along with clarified butter is to be burnt and used as incense for waving around it [Chap. 47]. The medicines to be administered to the elephants suffering from insanity during night are also to be charmed by hymns and given to it seeking an early cure for the diseases. Sacred ashes of the sacrifice performed at the dwelling place to appease the various spirits are to be smeared all over its body so that it gets a sound sleep in the night. An oil lamp should be lighted in the dwelling place to remove ‘evil eye’ disorders.

The text mentions that if elephants become too tired or stay awake in the night, the Vyāna Vāyu (one of the five vital airs in the body) enter the feet regions and cause inflammation leading to twisting of nails or a change of their colour along with boils. This is called Yavagaṇḍasira disease and is to be treated carefully and immediately [Chap. 41] (Sharma 1894g).

Other instances of night behaviour of elephants

Sage Pālakāpya’s text describes several other observations of night behaviour that are spread all over the text. Elephants may suffer from blood disorders, eye and foot diseases, urinary disorders and diseases due to aggravation of Pitta, Vāta and Kapha. They may be possessed by spirits. They may suffer from pregnant conditions, or due to harsh swampy and marshy areas of the

forests during rainy season, also get afflicted by pests, wild animals and serpents; or stricken by fear of falling into pits or seeing lightning strikes accompanied by rain; or suffer from loss of herd or group and family separation at night time. The Uttarasthāna [Snehapānavidhikathanam, Chap 2] states that such elephants must be administered oil in correct measures (Sharma 1894h).

If the oil is old, it affects the genitals, causes thirst and swooning. The elephant may also suffer from indigestion of oil during the night. The text prescribes that they must be made to sleep over cow-dung smeared ground and given a mouthful of soft tender green grass and barley to remove diseases due to Vāta. At several places, the text highlights that sleeping in unprescribed places that are not mind-pleasing to it, is the cause for several diseases.

Conclusions

The descriptions of Sage Pālakāpya's text are so exquisite that they inform us about the night time behaviour of elephants not found in other texts. Nocturnal behaviour varies from crop raiding to travels, suffering diseases, pregnancy, being attacked by other wild animals, succumbing to seasonal variations and so on. The text is clear in specifying these conditions and suitable remedies for the disturbances such as medication, pacifying the spirits, talismans, administering suitable diet in correct measures and maintaining a clean sleeping place. Study of these aspects by those keeping elephants, may allow identifying, examining and treating elephants in a timely manner, allowing easing of the pains that elephants may undergo from night disturbances.

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