

Human-Captive Elephant Relationships in Kerala: Historical Perspectives and Current Scenarios

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Abstract. In this paper, we have attempted to provide a preliminary understanding of the centuries-old tradition of elephants being kept in captivity in the state of Kerala and the gradual cultural transformations – from an initial reverence as living forms of lord Ganesha through being status symbols of the landed gentry to celebrities with ardent fan following in contemporary social media – that have changed the nature of their relationship with the local communities with the passage of time. The recent past has witnessed a deterioration of the traditional elephant-mahout relationship, the age-old knowledge of elephant biology and behaviour and their welfare increasingly jeopardised in recent times. Increasing commercialisation of pageantries has led to heightened conflict incidents in captivity and untimely mortalities. An exhaustive understanding of different aspects of captive elephant maintenance is warranted, to ensure better welfare practices.

Introduction

Capturing and taming wild Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*), to be deployed for various purposes ranging from draught work to wars and later in temples as idol bearers, dates back several centuries (Sukumar 2003). Unlike their African counterparts, Asian elephants have had close cultural associations with humans since time immemorial, this relationship greatly benefitting from a personification of the species in the form of the benevolent elephant-headed god, *Ganesha*. Elephants are perhaps the only undomesticated wild animals that have had such close associations with humans anywhere in the world. These have ranged from battlefields to backyards, where elephants have stood as living symbols of royalty, pride and pomp and as icons of intelligence, positive emotions and individual idiosyncrasies. Elephants have historically fought battles as the most effective of the four Indian war divisions, the other three being infantry, cavalry and chariots (Edgerton 1931). Extensive use of elephants in wars began in India and it is

highly likely that the Persians and Greeks learned about their use on the battlefield from Indians (Edgerton 1931).

Sculpture and paintings from centuries ago stand as testimony to the elephants' arduous journey across battlefields in central and southern India, as war machines, for the Mauryas, the Mughals and the Mewars (Trautmann 2015). The Pallava art of Mamallapuram (690 to 800 CE) near Chennai and Hoysala architecture (ca. 11th to 14th centuries CE) in different parts of Karnataka amply depict these war elephants – elegant elements of the art and architecture of ancient and mediaeval India (Sukumar 2003).

The earliest quasi-scientific descriptions of elephants, particularly of those used in war, in the classical Indian literature are in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (dated variably between c. 300 BCE to 300 CE), which, incidentally, may also be the first treatise on the commodification of elephants. While talking about the creation of *Gajavana* or 'elephant forests' for the protection

of elephants, Kautilya classifies elephant range across the subcontinent on the bases of their quality and the classes of elephants found therein (Sukumar 2011), into eight regions, of which the *Kalinga Vana* (present-day Odisha) was considered the best. What is most remarkable, however, is the extent to which this exhaustive volume, otherwise on statecraft, establishes the crucial necessity of elephant care and training, not only to ensure their performance in wars but also to ensure their welfare.

Several historical volumes, besides presenting vivid accounts of the religious association of elephants with different human communities, discuss, often in great detail, the involvement of elephants in wars, particularly from the 11th and 12th centuries CE and later. War elephants have also been dealt with extensively in recent literature (for example see Trautmann 2015). This paper addresses the religious and cultural significance of elephants in India, particularly in the southern state of Kerala, beginning with their role as a religious and cultural icon.

Elephants and the temples of India

The earliest religious associations of elephants in the India are possibly related to Buddhism, wherein elephants form an integral part of its cultural practices, owing primarily to the story of Queen Maya dreaming about a white elephant with six tusks and holding a white lotus flower in its trunk when she conceived Gautama Buddha (Trainor 2004). The conceptualisation of elephants as revered beings, however, started with their worship as living forms of Lord *Ganesh* during the 7th century CE (Sukumar 2003). Their involvement in religious establishments such as temples began later, perhaps during the 14th or 15th century CE, although definitive records are absent.

In India, elephants are extensively associated with temples in the southern states, possibly harking back to their use as draught animals to tote water from nearby sources, particularly in the state of Tamil Nadu. More recent evidence for this comes from various writings, as for example the biography of Ranganathan, the tallest

captive Asian elephant ever recorded, in which Krishnankutty (1988) writes how Ranganathan would fetch water from the river Kollidam for the daily rituals of the Srirangam temple in the Thiruchirappalli District of Tamil Nadu. The other well-known historical example of elephants being extensively used as draught animals comes from the Chola dynasty, which used them to transport monoliths for the construction of the domes of the Brihadeshwara temple (ca. 1010 CE) in Tanjore (now Thanjavur) district of Tamil Nadu (Boner *et al.* 1972).

With the advent of modern water-drawing techniques, however, the practice of using elephants to fetch water from rivers appears to have dwindled, although it continues to be practiced in a few temples like Srirangam. Elephants, nevertheless continued to be part of the temple sanctum, later being used for processions, such as the *Gajavāhana* but also for blessing devotees, as is still commonly seen in the southern states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

The Cochin State Manual by Menon (1911), in a section on elephant captures by the British East India Company, mentions the trapping of elephants in large numbers from the forests of Cochin (now Kochi) for the Imperial Forest Department. Towards the latter part of the 1890s, the Department had 20 elephants under their charge in the Cochin region, eight belonging to the government and 12 to the *Devaswom* (the temple management), a clear indication that these temples may have already begun their elephant pageantries at the time.

Elephants in Kerala: Evolution of an invaluable relationship

..*nikhilalōāka śaṅkaranāya śivaśaṅkaran, tante mastakatte alaṅkariccirikkunnu suvarṇṇamaya-māya candrakkalakaḷekkeāṅṅ tanre pēr anvar-thamākkukayāṅṅē enn tōānnumāruḷḷa candra-śekharaṅ enn pēruḷḷa ānayute mukaḷil kayarī...*

~Prose No. 26, Aṣṭamiprabhandhā

These lines from the *Aṣṭamiprabhandhā*, written in Malayalam by Melpathoor Narayana

Bhattathiri (1559–1645), refer to the crescent-shaped design on the caparison of elephants, indicating the historicity of the cultural association between the two species. The cultural significance of elephants is also evident from the state emblem of Kerala, seemingly evolved from the Travancore emblem, where two elephants stand facing one another with raised trunks, with the *Ashoka* pillar and a conch in between.

Many literary works in Malayalam, which include children’s literature, extensively discuss elephants while several of them personify and glorify individuals of the species. Vyloppilly Sreedhara Menon’s *Sahyante Makan* (Son of *Sahya* or Son of the Western Ghats), for instance, talks of the life of an elephant, who had been brought to captivity, thus depriving him of his glorious days in the Sahyadri or Western Ghats mountains.

Did the God of man slumbering within the fine temple hear that sky shaking call?

~Stanza 70, Son of Sahya

Menon writes of how the tusker longs to return to his golden days while he is being paraded in a temple, goes on a rampage instead, and is finally shot dead. While *Sahyante Makan* narrates the psyche of an elephant in captivity and the trauma he goes through, Kottarathil Sankunni, Chowalloor Krishnankutty and Puthoor Unnikrishnan celebrates the lives of tuskers,



Figure 1. Utsavam 1921: The famous festival at the Poornathrayeesha temple, Tripunithura. The festival is believed to be one of the oldest in the state. Courtesy: Prasanth Varma.

anthropomorphising them, describing them as legends, as saviours of human life, sometimes romancing female elephants and even as animals displaying vengeance and gratitude.

The lives of all these tuskers, however, are intimately intertwined with temples and their ceremonies, thus revealing the importance of the association between elephants and temples in the public imagination across Kerala. This may have been enhanced because, unlike in the neighbouring southern Indian states, elephants are invariably the bearers of deities during all rituals and associated pageantries in the important temples of the state. When elephants moved from battlefields to backyards, they also probably began their association with temples, as is evident from the caparisons, which perhaps evolved from the armouries, becoming a decorative item as opposed to its older form.

Several families in Kerala, particularly the elite *Namboothiri* Brahmin classes reared elephants as a symbol of prestige and this also meant a significant preference for tuskers due to their aesthetic value. While most temples in the states neighbouring Kerala appear to prefer female elephants, particularly considering the difficulties of handling males during musth, the preference for tuskers in Kerala seem to have led to a highly skewed, male-biased sex ratio (currently M : F ~ 5 : 1) in the state.

Harking back to the practical use of elephants in temples, particularly in Kerala, the oldest available record is that of the *Ārattupuzha pooram*, a pageantry of caparisoned pachyderms in Thrissur district of the state, an annual cultural extravaganza that currently parades tens of elephants, although, at one point, apparently 108 elephants were regularly displayed (Fig. 2). Also called the *devamela* or *devasangamam* (rendezvous of the gods and goddesses), the *Ārattupuzha pooram* is ~1400 years old, with its earliest inscription dating back to 583 CE. However, it is not clear when the pageantry or the elephant parades began at the festival. Anecdotal accounts refer to, Saint Vilwamangalam visiting the Thripunithura temple of the Cochin Royal Family and witnessing the majestic pageantry of

15 elephants in ca. 15th century CE (S. Anujan, pers. comm.).

Written accounts on the use of elephants in temple pageantries point to the period between 1700 and 1800 CE. The *Aithīyamāla* (Garland of Legends), by Sankunni (1909), talks of the lives of legendary tuskers of Malabar, Kochi and Travancore, during this period. In the 1780s, a falling-out between the Zamorin Raja of Malabar and the Maharaja of Cochin led to the latter disagreeing to send his elephants to the annual festival of the Guruvayur temple, which was then under the custody of the Zamorin (Seth 2009).

Privately owned elephants were largely in the possession of elite families or landlords, besides the Maharajahs, and were often captured in large numbers by the respective families from the forests in their possession. For instance, the Nilambur Rajas captured elephants from the Nilambur-Gudalur areas (presently part of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve) and Kollengode Rajas from parts of the Anamalai landscape (Innes & Evans 1915). Most of these captures, were through pitfall traps while practices such as the *kheddah* were more prominent in Karnataka, where George P. Sanderson had established facilities for the same by the 1880s.

During the 1800s, the East India Company performed several capture operations in Cochin for the Imperial Forest Department and elephants were primarily deployed for use in logging and for transportation during the construction of the Forest Tramway (Menon 1911).

The falling of the Gods: From deification to commodification

Forest elephants who dwelt there happily and by the power of fate have been brought to town in bonds, afflicted by harsh, bitter, cruel words, by excessive grief, fear, bewilderment, bondage, etc., and by sufferings of mind and body, are quite unable for long to sustain life, when from their own herds they have come into the control of men.

Edgerton 1931 (Chapter XI, *Mātangalīla*)

In the *Mātangalīla*, Nilakantha (Edgerton 1931) recounts the ponderings of the sage Palakapya on the agony of elephants held captive by the king Romapada, as part of his conflict-mitigation strategy. Romapada's question "*What can I do?*", asked in the context of human-elephant interactions, still holds true, centuries later, as we continue to argue over ways to approach this increasingly larger-than-life problem. The Palakapyan debates on elephant welfare are of particular relevance to Kerala, a southern Indian state, where elephants – formerly living symbols of pride and pomp – are today revered as cultural and religious icons.

The evolution of elephant management paralleled the socioeconomic and political changes in the state of Kerala and transitioned from the deification of elephants to their present-day, often unchecked, commodification, often accompanied by unwelcome changes in their welfare. Kautilya's concept of seeing elephants as assets (Sukumar 2011), where welfare was



Figure 2. Lineup of tuskers for the famous Thrissur Pooram, in the year 1931. Photo from the Cochin Royal Family Archives.

never overlooked, has largely been replaced by an attitude wherein monetary benefits are the major concern. With stricter wildlife management laws and international treaties, conservation policies in India made the capture of most wild species illegal, thereby curtailing removal of elephants from the wild, except in conflict situations. While the death rates in captivity have been consistent over time, the lack of influx of new elephants from the wild led to the unavailability of elephants in Kerala. This fuelled an opening of the floodgates: the elephant trade from India's north and the northeast. The trade was also channelled by competition between elephant owners to display the best tuskers, with favourable and auspicious marks and signs that the *Mātangalila* discusses. Consequently elephant calves sourced from the wild illegally were being sold, especially at the famed Sonepur *mela* in Bihar (Varma & Kumar 2010). Elephants were bought and transported in large numbers to Kerala, thereby leading to a sudden upsurge in numbers from around 200 to around 700 within a span of a few years (Cheeran 2012). This increase led to enhancement of their management problems as well.

The lack of trained mahouts consequent to the rapid increase in elephants has affected caregiving. Owners recruit untrained individuals, who are unaware of elephant behaviour and biology leading to an increase in incidents of elephant-mahout conflict and animal cruelty. The number of pageantries has also mushroomed in the recent past with the number of elephants being displayed in each of them increasing as

well. With television shows portraying the lives of individual elephants in mainstream visual media, they have assumed the roles of celebrities; a fan following has emerged and individual elephant fan clubs have been established. These 'celebrity elephants' have their own social media pages managed by the owners or contractors with continuously growing follower lists. This has also brought forth ego clashes and conflicts among the followers, leading to further deterioration of the care received by these elephants, particularly as parades are the stage for competition between rival groups.

To ensure the welfare of elephants, the Kerala Captive Elephant (Management and Maintenance) Rules were framed in 2003, to address the increasing welfare concerns and also mitigate conflict in captivity. Earlier, elephants walked from one festival location to another, receiving adequate exercise. This was gradually replaced by trucks with the advent of the Captive Elephant Rules, to avoid work- and transport-related stress in the individuals. Contrary to expectations, trucking elephants only added to the stress by increasing the distance the animals were made to travel. When they walked, the distance travelled was restricted to a few tens of kilometres, but with the introduction of the trucks, elephants were shuttled across the state, travelling hundreds of kilometres in hours, each parading in multiple festivals each day. In addition to fatigue-related stress, lack of sleep also increased during such extensive movement. Various medical problems such as impaction and

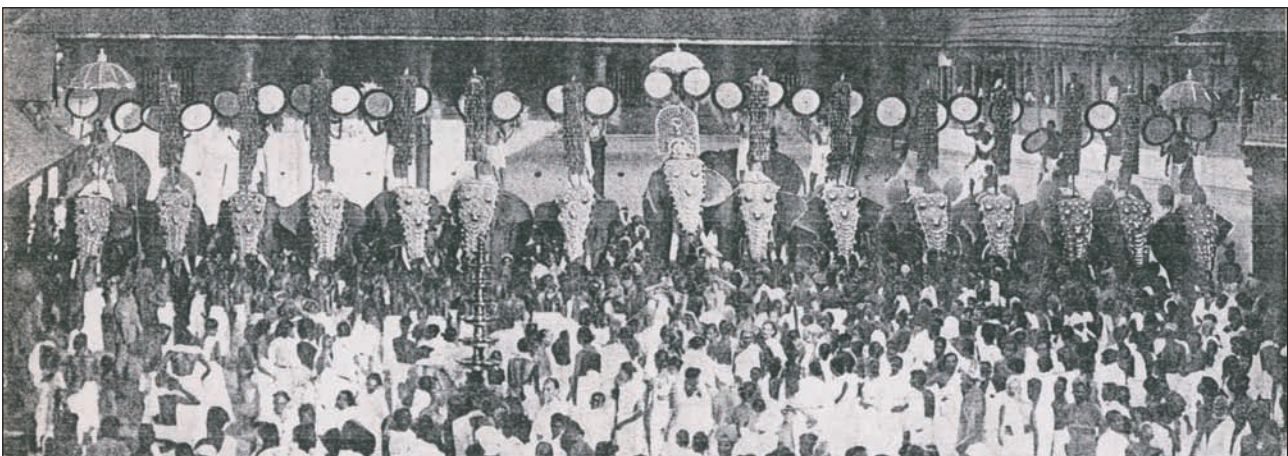


Figure 3. Poornathrayeesha temple festival, where the tallest captive tusker ever recorded, Chengallur Ranganathan, is leading the pageantry. Note the height difference between Ranganathan and other tuskers. The others tuskers were also the finest of those days. Courtesy: R. R. Varma.

digestive problems became common in elephants travelling on trucks.

Laws *et al.* (2007), in a study on physiological stress levels in the relocation of a male Asian elephant from one zoo to another, found that stress increased by 340% following transportation and persisted for a long period. Besides, the frequency of stereotypic behaviour, an indicator of behavioural stress, also increased significantly (Laws *et al.* 2007). Considering that one relocation event had such a high impact on the physiology and behaviour of an individual suggests that frequent travel by truck could pose many medical problems. This may be the primary reason behind the recent increase in deaths in captivity, particularly of younger individuals, many of whom have died due to impaction and cardiac disorders, both of which can be attributed to elevated stress levels.

With this recent rise in the societal status of elephants and their increasing cult status, there is heightened economic competition amongst elephant owners and managers, often at drastic cost to the welfare of the elephants themselves. Money-spinners, elephants are now shuttled across the state to be paraded at festivals as living representatives of the gods – accompanied by the slow abjection of certain traditional practices that were more sensitive to elephant health and welfare.



Figure 4. Gajamela or the Elephant Celebration: An event initiated as a tourism promotion event, which eventually faded away in the late 1990s. Lineup of 100+ tuskers used to be the central attraction of this event. Courtesy: Kirangat Mana Archives.

Yet another undesirable manifestation of the fanfare is ‘head-lifting’ competition, wherein elephants are forced to raise their heads and stand for prolonged periods of time during parades. Those that stand thus for the longest time are considered the best and receive monetary prizes. During such competitions elephants have been observed to charge at other elephants or at the crowd and display aggressive behaviour. Such actions could be due to a raised head signalling dominance among elephants (Poole 1999). The lack of understanding of such subtle behavioural aspects among elephants often brought about by unnatural physical and social environments, may have led to the increasing conflict incidents reported.

The regulation-led non-availability of elephants from other states and the increasing mortality of existing elephants have contributed to an increased demand of extant individuals across the state. To meet this demand, measures including arresting of musth are now being adopted, with complete disregard to the physical, physiological, and psychological health of the elephants. The increased use of anti-androgens, anti-psychotics and even antihistamines has been observed of late, disregarding the effects they can have on the vital organs of the animals. Increased workload on elephants leading to stress has also manifested in various forms of behavioural aberrations, that have led to increased conflict in captivity, human fatalities and extensive property damages, besides increased mortality of elephants, often in their prime.

Conclusion

The current state of captive elephant management in the state of Kerala warrants a thorough analysis into the temporal transformations in human-captive elephant relationships in Kerala over historical time, as is discussed here, and explore how these have influenced the lives of both protagonists, particularly in contemporary contexts. Conflict with captive elephants, which is often ignored in the larger debates on human-wildlife interactions, despite its economic impact being at par or even higher than that with their wild counterparts, needs to be discussed in

greater detail. Policy-level interventions are the need of the hour as are genuinely empathetic enquiries into the behaviour of individual elephants and the people they regularly interact with, and combined efforts from all stakeholders – ranging from mahouts through officials of different government departments and temple management organisations to the local people – are required to address the myriad problems that captive elephants confront today. A closer attempt at understanding the deep nature of human-elephant relationships under conditions of captivity, evolution of certain aspects of management practices that affect elephant wellbeing or a comparative understanding of traditional approaches across different regions of the country where captive elephants share close bonds with humanity is required for a nuanced addressing of the issue.

King Romapada’s eternal question, “*Now, what can I do?*”, posed in the *Mātangalila*, is still in search of an answer.

Acknowledgements

Sreehari Venkateswaran helped in collating archival records and photographs, which provided insights into the historical aspects. Our ideas have been shaped by discussions with Balakrishnan Erady, Hari Rama Varma, Prasanth Varma, Prasanna Varma, S Anujan, Raghu Ganesh, and Aneesh S – we thank each and every one of them. We are grateful to Raman Sukumar for valuable information regarding the use of elephants in captivity.

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