

Classification of Elephants in Indian Elephantology: A Review with Special Reference to the *Mātaṅgalīlā*

Jambugahapitiye Dhammadhoka

Department of Classical Languages, University of Peradeniya, Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

Author's e-mail: jambugahapitiye.dhammadhoka@arts.pdn.ac.lk

Abstract. Elephant-classification is a central theme in ancient Indian elephantology. Sanskrit texts use a range of criteria from physical attributes to behaviour, in classifying elephants. This paper provides an overview of elephant-classification in ancient times, with particular reference to the *Mātaṅgalīlā* of Nīlakanṭha.

Introduction

The Indian elephant (*Elephas maximus indicus*) is one of four subspecies of Asian elephant, the others being the Sri Lankan elephant (*Elephant maximus maximus*), the Sumatran elephant (*Elephant maximus sumatranus*) and the Bornean elephant (*Elephant maximus borneensis*). The Indian elephant occurs in mainland Asia, while the other three are island populations. Elephants of these regions are animals of cultural, religious, and social importance in the Asian region, and they are very closely associated by people with many purposes.

Studying the different aspects of human life and its interconnectedness with the environment was central to ancient Indian civilisation, resulting in field of study named *sāstra* (science). It included various disciplines such as religious rituals, philosophical teachings, statecraft, medicine, erotica, paintings and theatre. One of these disciplines was *Āyurveda* which is commonly known as 'Indian medicine'. *Āyurveda* was not confined to human medicine but included that of animals (*paśvāyurveda*) as well as botany (*vrkṣāyurveda*). The main focus of *paśvāyurveda* was elephants, horses and cattle, as they were used in warfare, transportation, and cultivation. Hence, it was of vital importance to breed, tame, bring up, train, nurture, and treat them systematically. This led to the development of three different '*sāstras*' pertaining to the three animals, *gajaśāstra*, concerning elephants, *aśvaśāstra*, concerning horses and *gośāstra*, concerning cattle. The scope of *ga-*

jaśāstra or elephantology, included capturing, breeding and training elephants.

Indian elephantology

Early Vedic literature refers to elephants as *mrga-hastin* or 'animal with a hand' (Müller 1877; Roth & Whitney 1924). However, the elephant is ubiquitous in the subsequent literature and has been referred to by many terms, such as *gaja*, *kuñjara*, *ibha*, *nāga*, *mātaṅga* and *hastin* (Burrow 1955). References to this animal are found scattered in the post-Vedic literature as well. Later a different literary genre on elephantology was developed and many texts were produced. Among them the *Hastyāyurveda*, *Gajaśāstra*, *Mātaṅgalīlā*, *Gajaśikṣā*, and *Gajagrahanaprakāra* are prominent. The focus of this article will be mainly on the *Mātaṅgalīlā* since it is the most comprehensive, concise but self-contained, and charming and eloquent *gajaśāstra*-text in the Sanskrit literature.

Classification of elephants

Classification of elephants is one of the main themes in Indian elephantology. There are a number of methods used classifying elephants in ancient Sanskrit texts, such as on the basis of caste, physical characteristics, mental qualities, humours, physical strength and capacity, and trainability.

Classification of elephants into four casts, is very common in Indian elephantology. These four castes are *brāhmaṇa* (brahmin), *kṣatriya*

(warrior), *vaiśya* (artisan), and *sūdra* (serf). This division is found in the *Arthaśāstra* (Kangle 1960), *Yuktikalpataru* (Sastrī 1917), and *Gajaśāstra* (Śāstri 1958). This classification was considered to have a hereditary basis, but was seemingly based on physical and mental characteristics, and capacity of elephants. The physical characteristics mainly included colour and smell while the mental characteristics included un/kindness, un/gratefulness, anger and calmness. Skills in warfare, endurance, working ability etc. are considered to be the capacity of elephants. In another classification, elephants were considered to be successors of eight divine elephantine species namely *Airāvata*, *Pundarīka*, *Supratīka*, *Vāmana*, *Kumuda*, *Añjana*, *Puṣpadanta*, and *Sārvabhauma* (Sastrī 1917; Śāstri 1958). This classification originated from mythology and was adapted to correspond with some physical and mental characters. For instance, the *Airāvata* class of elephants is said to possess a long trunk, small and stout penis, ears and teeth of white colour, and large body while a *Pundarīka* class elephant is courageous, clever, passionate, and uncontrollable.

In the *Gajaśāstra*, elephants are also classified into different categories based on physical and mental characteristics and capacity similar to that mentioned above. According to one categorisation, elephants were classified into three main categories: *bhadra* (excellent), *manda* (slow), and *mṛga* (beast) with an additional category called *miśra* or *samkīrṇa* (mixed) (Śāstri 1958) for elephants bearing the characteristics of more than one main category. These four types are mentioned in *Arthaśāstra* as well (Kangle 1960). The *miśra* type of elephants are again divided into nine: *bhadramanda*, *bhadramṛga*, *mandamṛga*, *mandabhadra*, *mṛgabhadra*, *mṛgamanda*, *bhadramandamṛga*, *mandamṛgabhadra*, and *mṛgabhadramanda* (Śāstri 1958).

In another classification given in the *Gajaśāstra*, elephants are divided into seven groups based on physical characteristics peculiar to different gods (Śāstri 1958). They are *brahmāṁśaka*, *prājāpatyaṁśaka*, *indrāṁśaka*, *dhanadāṁśaka*, *varuṇāṁśaka*, *śāśāṅkāṁśaka*,

and *agnyāṁśaka*. This classification also originated from mythology.

Based on various physical qualities, the *Gajaśāstra* classifies elephants into a few other groups and names them after different beings of different realms such as *deva*, *gandharva*, *vipra*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, *sūdra*, *piśāca*, *bhujāṅga* and *rākṣasa*. The *Gajaśāstra* also divides elephants into four groups as *deva*, *dānava*, *yakṣa*, and *gandharva* (Śāstri 1958).

In one of the classifications in the *Yuktikalpataru* all elephants are divided into two main groups: virtuous (*śuddha*) and vicious (*bhīma*). There are twelve types of elephants in the virtuous category: *ramya*, *bhīma*, *dhvaja*, *adhīra*, *vīra*, *śūra*, *aṣṭamaṅgala*, *sunanda*, *sarvatobhadra*, *sthira*, *gambhīravedin*, and *varāroha* and twelve types in the vicious category: *dīna*, *kṣīṇa*, *viṣama*, *virūpa*, *vikala*, *khara*, *vimada*, *dhmāpaka*, *kāka*, *dhūmra*, *jaṭila*, *ajinī*, *maṇḍalī*, *śvīrī*, *hatāvarta*, *mahābhaya*, *rāṣṭraha*, *muṣalī*, *bhālī*, *nihsattva* (Sastrī 1917). According to the level of strength elephants possess, they are also classified into three groups as *uttama*, *madhyama*, and *hīna* in the *Gajaśāstra* (Śāstri 1958).

In the *Arthaśāstra* the ability to be trained or tamed, which is a very important factor in warfare and other work, hence is relevant to statecraft, is used for classification of elephants into four types: *damya* (tameable), *sannāhya* (war elephant), *aupavāhya* (riding elephant), and *vyāla* (rogue) (Kangle 1960).

The *Gajaśāstra* also classifies elephants on the basis of their colour into three groups: *śuddha*, *vyāmiśra*, and *antarvarṇa*. The *śuddha* type is again divided into three categories as *harita*, *rakta*, and *kṛṣṇa*. *Vyāmiśra* is also divided again into three: *harikṛṣṇa*, *śvetarakta*, and *kṛṣṇarakta*. The *antarvarṇa* type is also threefold: *antaḥpāṇḍaralohita*, *antaḥpāṇḍarakṛṣṇa*, *antarlohitasita* (Śāstri 1958).

Elephant classification in the *Mātaṅgalīlā*

The *Mātaṅgalīlā* discusses many types of elephants under different classifications. They are

scattered throughout the text. These classifications are not very different from what is found in other texts, but at times, there are slight differences in naming as well as interpretation.

Elephant classifications in the *Mātaṅgalīlā* consists of those based on character, sensitivity, humours and a fourfold classification.

Classification based on character

This is based on behavioural traits and classifies elephants into eight groups: *deva* (god), *dānava* (demon), *gandharva* (divine musician), *yakṣa* (devil), *rākṣa* (ogre), *mānava* (human), *piśāca* (goblin), and *uraga* ([divine] serpent). They are given these names as they possess the qualities of those supernatural beings and human beings. Their traits of characters are as follows (Sāstrī 1910; Edgerton 1931).

- *Deva* – Beauty, odour of white-water lily or sandalwood, *Alstonia scholaris* or orange tree or lotus (*padma*) or *Cathartocarpus fistula*, beams in face, interest of a young elephant, cry of a *koil*
- *Dānava* – Doing reprehensible things, much delight in fighting, mean nurtured, heartless, odour of *Vitex negundo* berry or aloes or fish, killing others
- *Gandharva* – Odour of *Gaertnera racemosa* or *yuktīkā* (a kind of jasmine) or lotus (*abja*) or *Rotteleria tinctoria* or *nāga* or yellow sandal, fondness of songs, excellent gait, handsome tusks, eyes, temporal bosses, head, trunk, trunk tips, few spots on the body
- *Yakṣa* – Radiance, impatience, favoured well, pleasant aspect, spirit, erected ears
- *Rākṣa* – Odour of cow or ape or ass or camel or cat or urine or dung or putrefaction, slaying other animals, violence at night, eating sour foods, meat, drinking blood, undisciplined, ingratitude, refractory behaviour
- *Mānava* – The *mānava*-type of elephants are again divided into four as is the case, according to Indian tradition, with human beings. They are named after the castes namely *vipra* (brahmin), *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, and *śūdra*. Their traits are given as follows:
 - *Vipra* – Purity, fragrance of honey or milk or sacrificial rice concoction or ghee or mango flower, fondness of peace, friend-

liness to all elephants, composedness, fondness of bathing, right mindedness

- *Kṣatriya* – Odour of sandalwood or butter or yellow orpiment or red arsenic or bdelium, skilful in warlike operations, bravery in battle, heroics in weapon handling
- *Vaiśya* – Odour of *Pentapetes phoenicea* or rice or sesame or *ketaki*-flower or jasmine, spots in uvula, patience in pain, eating flesh, fondness of kind words, ability to be appeased quickly
- *Śūdra* – Delight in leftovers, getting frightened easily, having sour acrid odour or odour of goat or bones crab, wrath, treacherousness, cowardliness, ingratitude
- *Piśāca* – Solitude, odour of corpse or red goat, straying away, wandering at night, deep roar, violence enrage-ment on the days of moon's change, stupidity
- *Urāga* – Odour of fish or water grass (*śaivala*) or a type of basil (*phanirjaka*) or mud or brandy or raw fish, fright, enrage-ment at night, delight in water and dust

The fourfold classification

The fourfold classification of elephants in the *Mātaṅgalīlā* consists of *bhadra* (excellent), *manda* (slow), *mrga* (beast) and *saṅkīrṇa* (mixed).

- *Bhadra* – Elephants with a fat body but not over-stout, and meaningful sensitivity, hav-ing rosy colour, significant girth and length, cloud-like roar, and tawny eyes and tusks, who are mountain ranging and enduring, good caravanners, resolute, energetic, heroic, and loved by cows. These elephants were born in the *kṛtayuga* in the spring.
- *Manda* – Elephants with ability to range both rivers and mountains, are dispirited, not very long, slow in motion, characterized by dull-ness, dark in colour, and lustful, who have short ears, stout round body, and large curved tusks, whose eyes have yellow glint, whose phlegm predominates itself, and who responds only to harsh stimuli. These ele-phants were born in the *tretāyuga* in the winter season.

- *Mrga* – These are smallish elephants with minor girth and length, leaning body, greyish colour, high sensitiveness, large eyes, short tail, who is violent, who eats much, ranges in rivers, whose mind is unstable and gets angry easily, and in whom the bile predominates. These elephants were born in the *dvāparayuga* in the rainy season.
- *Saṅkīrṇa* – The *Mātāṅgaltā* does not specifically give any characteristics of this type of elephants and merely mentions that they have mixed characteristics that belong to the other three types mentioned above. These are the elephants that are born in the *kaliyuga*.

The *kṛtayuga*, *tretāyuga*, and *dvāparayuga* relate to ages which have already passed. Therefore, even though this classification is based on physical characteristics, only the last type of elephants now exists in the world and the other three types of elephants: *bhadra*, *manda*, and *mrga* are not present anymore.

Classification based on sensitivity

The sensitivity of elephants varies. Hence elephants respond in different ways to stimuli i.e. commands by the elephant-driver by goad, feet, with hook or by shouting. Accordingly, elephants are classified into seven groups: *atyarthavedī* (extreme-feeler), *uttānavedī* (shallow-feeler), *gambhīravedī* (deep-feeler), *anvarthavedī* (conformably meaning-feeler), *pratyarthavedī* (contrarily meaning-feeler), *karkaśavedī* (harsh-feeler) and *siddhavedī* (perfect-feeler) (Sāstrī 1910; Edgerton 1931).

- *Atyarthavedī* – This type of elephant is frightened of goad, hook, or stick even from afar and trembles when touched with them.
- *Uttānavedī* – The elephant who feels the impact of the sharp goad or hook at its first contact with the elephant's skin or hair.
- *Gambhīravedī* – Even when the hook pierces the skin or draws the blood out of the elephant, it does not feel the impact. This type of elephant feels it only after the hook pierces the flesh.
- *Anvarthavedī* – This type of elephant understands commands well. It is sensitive to the guidance made by feet or with the goad but is neither frightened nor confused.

- *Pratyarthavedī* – The one who functions contrarily to commands, these elephants go backward when guided forward and vice versa.
- *Karkaśavedī* – The elephant who does not have proper sensitivity and capability to act on its own and when guided, acts contrarily, and shows excessive vice.
- *Siddhavedī* – This is the best. This elephant is gentle all the time in all conditions and all its feelings. It does not show vice at all.

Classification based on humours

According to *Āyurveda*, there are three main dynamic forces, which are known as *tridosas* (three humours), in the physical body of all humans and animals (Bujarbarua 1979; Jaggi 1981). These are *vāta* (air), *pitta* (bile), and *kapha* (phlegm). When any of these three exceeds any of the other two or both, the body becomes sick. Therefore, it is essential to keep these three in balance in order to maintain the health of the body. As per the *Āyurveda* teachings, one of these three humours essentially predominates each and every physical body and it is an innate feature of a being. This predominant humour is responsible for the healthiness and basic characteristics of the being in concern. Accordingly, elephants are also classified into main three groups as *vātika* (windy), *paittika* (biliary), and *ślaiśmika* (phlegmatic). Their characteristics are given as follows (Sāstrī 1910; Edgerton 1931).

- *Vātika* – The elephant in which 'air' predominates and who suffers from disease of wind, is lacking courage, not enduring, stiff, mournful, quick, stupid, and undependable in work, and has broken nails, unstable mind, contrary sensitivity, rough skin, little hair, visible veins, rough tusks, and ugly eyes and trembling feet.
- *Paittika* – The elephant in which 'bile' predominates and who suffers from disease of bile is angry, much eating, red-eyed, feeble, very false, loving shade, and without much beauty, has weak eyes, and shallow sensitivity, and dislikes heat, discharges mucus-fluid with little delay, and tends to a wasted state. The trunk, tusks, skin, nails, ears, hair, neck,

fore parts, hind parts, and feet of this elephant are all thin.

- *Ślaiśmika* – The elephant in which ‘phlegm’ predominates, who suffers from disease of phlegm is very amiable, not oversusceptible to anger, fearless, steadfast, free from instability, fond of instrumental music and songs, very calm, very slow in moving, and lustful, has yellow eyes, very large toes, trunk, head frontal bosses etc., slow bodily fire of digestion, deep sensitivity, stout and smooth tusks.

Apart from the above classifications, the influence of air, bile, and phlegm on elephants are also discussed elsewhere in the *Mātaṅgalīlā* (Sāstrī 1910; Edgerton 1931). All the humours are well-balanced in *bhadra* elephants; hence these elephants are very healthy. The phlegm predominates in *manda* elephants; hence they are slow and dull. As a result of predominance of bile in *mrga* elephants, they get angry easily. Further, humours give some particular colours to elephants. For instance, elephants become tawny, and yellow as a result of mingling the blood with bile, and phlegm respectively. Elephants get black if the bile is predominant in them. Similarly, they become white if the phlegm is predominant in them. Furthermore, the *Mātaṅgalīlā* divides the eight types of elephants based on character, into three groups. Namely *sattva* (harmony), *rajas* (passion), and *tamas* (darkness). *Sattva* is the type of elephant in which the ‘air’ predominates. Elephants who belong to the *kṣatriya*, *gandharva*, *deva*, and *brāhmaṇa* categories are *sattva*-elephants. If the ‘bile’ predominates in elephants, they are called *rajas*. These elephants belong to *vaiśya*, and *śūdra* categories. Finally, if the ‘phlegm’ pre-

dominates, they are the *tamas*-elephants and all the other categories i.e., *dānava*, *yakṣa*, *rākṣasa*, *piśāca*, and *uraga* belong to that.

References

Bujarbarua DD (1979) *Elephant Lore in Sanskrit Literature*. PhD Thesis, University of Gauhati, Guwahati.

Burrow T (1955) *The Sanskrit Language*. Motilal Banarsiādass Publishers Private Limited, Delhi.

Edgerton F (1931) *The Elephant-Lore of the Hindus*. Yale University Press, New Haven.

Jaggi OP (1981) *Āyurveda: Indian System of Medicine*. Atma Ram and Sons, Delhi.

Kangle RP (1960) *The Kauṭilya Arthaśāstra, Part I*. University of Bombay, Bombay.

Müller FM (1877) *The Hymns of the Rgveda, Vol. I*. Trübner and Co., London.

Roth R & Whitney WD (1924) *Atharva Veda Sanhita*. Ferd. Dümmlers Verlagsbuchhandlung, Berlin.

Sastrī IC (1917) *Yuktikalpataru*. Siddheswar Machine Press, Calcutta.

Śāstri KSS (1958) *Gajaśāstram*. T.M.S.S.M. Library, Tanjore.

Śāstrī, TG (1910) *The Mātaṅgalīlā of Nīlakantha*. Government Press, Trivandrum.