

Book Review

“A Trunk Full of Tales” by D.K. Lahiri Choudhury

Reviewed by Jayantha Jayewardene

Prof. Lahiri Choudhury is a man of great stature. Not only physical stature but also stature of academic achievement, elephant knowledge, gentle and exemplary conduct. He is professor emeritus of English at the Rabindra Bharati University, Calcutta. In the field of elephants he is the author of many articles, papers, study reports and books. The quality of this book adds to his stature.

In A Trunk Full of Tales the professor gives the readers the anecdotal benefit of his long association and relationship with elephants with a wide spectrum of anecdotes and stories.

The first chapter titled Growing up with elephants is the longest. It deals with the author’s personal interactions with elephants, which he has started at a young age. He talks of his Great Grandfather’s involvement with elephants. He had 30 elephants in his Pilkana or elephant stables. What comes through in this chapter is the author’s love for elephants, his intimate knowledge of elephants both tame and wild and the many activities that he has engaged in to understand, manage and conserve elephants.

In the chapters that follow he writes about individual elephants and their unique behaviour.

In the next section of the book the author deals with rogue elephants and marauding elephants that cause much damage to both crops and human lives. These are all elephants that he has had a personal experience with.

Professor Choudhury’s love for elephants is also reflected in another way. He devotes a chapter to ‘Lalji’ Chandra Barua, perhaps India’s best known ‘elephant person’ in recent times. The author covers the background of Lalji’s ancestors, who were closely connected

to elephants and some of these deeds. He also gives the detailed descriptions of the lives of some of the elephants that Lalji had. This chapter gives the reader a deep insight into the elephant world of that time.

In the chapter Rogues and Marauders, the author discusses elephant shooting in India and Sri Lanka, both as a sport and also as a means of protecting crops. He goes on to trace the development of legal protection afforded to elephants from the 19th century to date. This chapter also discusses the human – elephant conflicts that have developed.

The author’s experiences with elephants over the years in Cachar, the Garo Hills, East and West Medinipur, Dalma and North Bengal follow. These chapters give the readers an insight into the conditions then and many descriptions of elephant behaviour. These chapters are full of anecdotes, which have a personal touch.

This book will capture the attention of anyone who is interested in elephants. The empathy and love that the author has for elephants, which comes through in this book will certainly whet the interest of the reader and maybe move them to some action towards the conservation of this majestic species.

A Trunk Full of Tales
D.K. Lahiri Choudhury
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