

The Training Methods Used in Myanmar Timber Enterprise

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Introduction

In Myanmar, just before the Second World War in 1942, the total population of elephants owned by the Myanmar Timber Industries was about ten thousand. They consisted of approximately 6500 Full Grown (18 years and above), 2500 Trained Calves (5 to 18 years) and 1000 Calves at Heel (suckling baby elephants). During the second World War, about 2/3 of the elephants owned by the timber industry died due to overwork, undernourishment, or were released in the deep jungle and slaughtered by poachers to obtain meat and ivory.

Myanmar Timber elephants are classified according to age and working ability into six classes Class I are elephants which can drag more than 2 ton logs, aged 30-45 years. Class II elephants are those that can drag 1-2 ton logs aged 25-50 years. Class III elephants can drag up to 1 ton and are usually aged 18-25 years (elephants being trained to log) or over 50 years. Class IV are those in poor body condition, disabled and over 50 years old (retired elephants). Class V are elephants in training, used in transportation and travelling, aged 5-15 years. Class VI is baby elephants under 5 years old.

In Myanmar, baby elephants live freely with their mothers the entire duration of baby life. So, the baby elephants are wild and need to be tamed for utilization in the field. Therefore, we start to train at 4 to 5 yrs old according to their body conformation. The objectives of the training are that the baby elephants have controlled manners and can be utilized in the field.

Types of baby elephant training methods

There are three kinds of training methods used in Myanmar, namely: two-sided crush method,

one-sided crush and cradle combined method, and cradle only method.

The two-sided crush method has a safety margin for trainers, but it can cause some damages and injuries to elephants as they can sustain injuries by pushing against the sides. The one-sided crush and cradle combined method, is also similar to the former method. The cradle only method is the best because of its safety for elephants and trainers. The trainee calf can be moved freely in the cradle without injuries, except for some skin abrasions due to ropes.

The structure of the crush in Myanmar

Important points in building a two-sided crush are:

1. A stout tree with a seven or eight foot girth is required for the head of the crush, or three posts each twelve feet in length, eight inches in diameter, and buried at least 3 feet into the ground.
2. Eight posts for each side of the crush are required; another two posts are required for the mouth or the entrance of the crush.
3. Three horizontal poles are needed as a barrier on each side of the crush, and they should be 15 feet long and 6 inches in diameter.
4. The shape of the two sided crush is similar to the capital letter "V". The length of the crush should be eight and half feet long, the closed end of crush should be about two and half feet wide, and the mouth of the crush should be about five feet wide.
5. The eight posts on both sides should be set two feet apart from each other vertically, and must be planted into the ground about three feet.
6. The three horizontal poles on each side of the crush must be tied with strong cane or secured with nails on the inside of the vertical poles.

Important points of the cradle method

The building of a cradle for elephant training is simpler than the two-sided crush, and one-sided crush combined with the cradle method.

For the cradle method, only three posts are needed along with three bars and some strong ropes (Fig. 1). The structure of the crush for the cradle method is an equal two sided triangle shape. The head of the crush in the cradle method is wide, and the distance between the two posts should be nine feet apart. The back post is situated about twelve feet from the centre of two posts. One stout bar must be put on the top of two posts, and the other two bars must be put on the front cross bar and on the back post horizontally. The height of the crush must be nine feet, and buried into the ground four feet. In this method, some soft and firm ropes and a chest band about six inches wide are required.

The requirements of medical and controlling instruments

Xylazine 2% is used in capturing baby elephants. The age of baby elephants is about five years, and some are not weaned at that time. Xylazine is used as a sedative, and the amount varies according to the resistance of the baby elephants. Most baby elephants are sedated within a few minutes with 2.5 to 3 ml of Xylazine. Sometimes there is also a need to prevent tetanus in trainee calves. The other tools needed in elephant training are an ear hook, some long chains, and fetters (foot chain). However, fetters occasionally made with cane are used during the training period.



Figure 1. Trainee calves are trained by cradle.

Other requirements for training

Tamarind bolus and salt, paddy or rice, and some green fodder, which is collected daily by mahouts during the training period, are fed. Pig fat is used as a lubricant to minimize wounds or injuries.

The training procedure

The procedure of training is similar in all methods. The only difference is in the building of the crush. The duration of the training period in all methods is about one month.

If the calf, at the age of 4 or 5 years, is wild or timid, its mother is tied to a tree near the crush for an hour or two daily, and tamarind bolus fed by placing it inside the crush as bait for the calf. The calf should be conditioned to be familiar with and enter into the crush prior to beginning training. The calf is noosed at the neck by an experienced oozie or trainer, with the assistance of a pair of well trained full-grown elephants, known as Khunchee elephants. The neck noose must be fitted to the neck, not be too loose or too tight, to prevent it from slipping off.

The calf is put into the crush with the aid of Khunchees. In some cases, when some elephant calves are wild and strong and resist going into the crush, we use Xylazine as a sedative. It is useful and provides safety for trainers. As soon as the calf gets into the crush, the mouth of the crush is closed with the three horizontal bars. The neck noose rope is tied to the head tree and post. The head tree or closed end is covered with a soft pad made of tree bark to prevent injury to the calf's head from butting. The four legs are tied to the nearest vertical posts of the crush, and then the hind legs and fore legs are each tied together in the shape of the number 8. After finishing tying the ropes on the calf, we paint or pour pig fat into the knots of ropes as a lubricant to prevent skin abrasions. Then, the ear hook is used on the upper base line of the right ear. It is fixed with a rope six feet long, which should be rather loosely fastened to the upper rope.

Most calves are put in the crush in the morning and taken out in the evening after intensively



Figure 2. Trainee calf trying to escape from the cradle.

teaching them fettering and unfettering, riding on the back or neck, and a few words of command to calm down (Fig. 2). In the evening, the intelligent and docile calf is trained to crouch at the mouth of the crush with the aid of posts and iron hook or Choons with long handles. But if the calf is strong and wild, it will be kept in the crush overnight.

Tied up position (Sakanchi) - 1st step

The trainee calf is walked with the aid of Khunchee elephants, and the neck rope is tied to the tree post. The hind leg ropes are tied to strong posts or trees, and the sling is fixed around the calf's chest just behind the fore legs. The sling is well smeared with pig fat to prevent skin injuries. The upper rope is fixed to the breast rope. In this step, the trainee calf is kept in a standing position, and its fore legs are in fetters, with well lubricated smooth line chain. Its hind legs are lashed together in a figure 8, and fastened with the long ropes to a strong tree. All ropes are moved, loosened, or tightened whenever necessary. It is very important to prevent rope abrasions or rope sores on the captive trainee calf.

The trainer allows the trainee calf to sleep a little during the first night, and training starts sometimes by talking while rubbing and handling every part of its body, especially on its fore legs to accept the fetters, as well as fastening and unfastening (Fig. 3). Riding on its back and neck, the oozie feeds it a little bolus of tamarind, some packets of vegetables, or leaves, or a small piece of sugar cane. One trainer stays in front of the calf, out of reach of its trunk. Drinking water is given by a wooden tub placed not too close.

The trainers train the calf for an hour and let it rest for an hour till the night, and watch it carefully, feeding it with green fodder after the training period. The ropes on the calf are reset whenever they are loose or tight. The calf is taught to "crouch" at the mouth of the crush for three days and then the calf is walked with its oozie riding on its back, with the assistance of Khunchee elephants (Fig. 4). It is bathed and the whole body is rubbed with "doh-nwe" or "Sugit" in the stream every morning and evening. Doh-nwe and Sugit are herbal plants for cleaning elephant's skin while taking a bath. These plants are a soap substitute and are species of creeper. During walking, one trainer leads it by holding the rope of the ear hook and feeding tamarind with salt and a species of banana tree.

After a short walk, the calf is brought back to camp and given a hot application with an infusion of "Wan-U" or "medicant bark" (herbal plant bark used for inflammation. It is a species of creeper abundant in the forest) on all parts of the calf's body. It is also provided necessary veterinary treatment, and hand-fed with half-boiled paddy plus common salt. The trainee calf is fed with sufficient amounts of fresh green fodder. Drinking water is given three times a day.

Circling around the post (Tine Lae) - 2nd step

After finishing the tied up position (3-5 days), the trainee calf is moved to "circling around the post" with the long neck rope. The tree or stout post must be debarked and smooth, to allow the trainee calf to walk around the post by circling it. In this step, the calf must understand how to



Figure 3. Calf training in the night, rubbing every part of its body.



Figure 4. Walking trainee calf with the help of Khunchee elephant and some trainers by pulling ear hook.

walk with fetters and hind leg ropes. It should be taught with the help of the ear hook. Riding with the help of Khunchee elephants, and bathing every morning and evening continues. This step may last 3-5 days, and its hind leg ropes may be unfastened and the tethering chain may be tied to the fore leg over the fetters. At this stage, the calf is in a much more relaxed condition and can sleep lying down. The trainee calf is less restrained, except for fetters on the forelegs and ear hook on the right ear. In the daytime, the calf is frequently transferred to various locations around the camp where the food is adequate for it. A wooden bell is hung on the calf's neck. In this stage, the calf becomes more familiar with its oozie. Daily practice such as rubbing, riding on the back and neck, and teaching fettering and un-fettering are carried out continuously.

Day release and night restraint - 3rd step

After 15 days and finishing the two steps above, the calf accepts the commands of its oozie and is accustomed to its fetters and long chain, knowing how to move comfortably, to sleep, and stand up. So the calf is released with fetters and a tethering chain into the jungle near the camp, watched by its oozie, and brought back in the evening to the training camp. The calf is allowed to drink in the stream as and when it wants. This step lasts 3-5 days, and its oozie must pay close attention to

his elephant's sleeping habits, eating habits, and roaming or wandering habits in the jungle. Lifting one foreleg, "Myouk", is taught at this stage.

Day and night release - 4th step

After being released in the day and restrained at night, the calf is released in the daytime and at night when the calf obeys its oozie's verbal commands and understands its oozie's manner and desires. In this stage, the close relationship between man and elephant is developing. The calf, however, must be caught early every morning and evening and brought back to camp, bathed every morning, then fed paddy, tamarind, and salt as a supplement. The physical examination of the trainee calf must include its body condition, wounds and injuries due to training, fetters, tethering chain, wooden bell, and treatment should be done if necessary. Daily practice should be done continuously, according to the procedure in the daytime.

After the training period, this calf is used in light duties such as travelling, and carrying baggage from one camp to another during the rainy season.

The training methods used in Myanmar can be cruel for baby elephants, and therefore, sometimes we are faced with accidental death in the crush. Due to the intense training, the baby elephants may get wounds, injuries, and stress. Among the three training methods, the cradle method is easier on the calf because there are no injuries to any part of the body except skin injuries due to ropes. Currently, our department has been giving guidance and instructions to train the calf with soft training when the baby is three months old till five years old, and to do so continuously step by step, so that the death rate of baby elephants due to training accidents can be minimized. We invite anyone with other ideas on training for our elephants to share them with us.