

Job Risks and Problems of Mahouts (Elephant Keepers) in Kerala, South India

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Introduction

Elephants have been an integral part of human life from time immemorial. This attractive wild animal has become an important part of religious and social activities. Kerala, has around 650-700 captive elephants and is known as the land of festivals. Elephants are an integral part of the Kerala culture and traditions. Traditionally, in Kerala for each elephant there are 3 elephant keepers or mahouts.

Elephants' interactions with public have occasionally brought unpleasant accidents, thereby loss of human lives, injuries and damages to properties (Joy 1990; Ajithkumar & Rajeev 2003). For each and every such instance, it has become a tendency to blame the mahouts.

Without a mahout—a person who drives, takes care of and controls the elephant (Fig. 1), no captive elephant can be taken to the public. But the story of the miseries of mahouts is alarming as is the absence of sufficient protective laws and training of the mahouts. Mental health and physical fitness of mahouts are primary requirements to control an elephant. This study was carried out to find out the job risks and problems of mahouts in Kerala.

Method

The subject of this study was the risk elements and the problems of mahouts. 200 mahouts from Thrissur and Palakkad districts in Kerala were interviewed through home and field visits.

Results and discussion

From the profile of respondents it is revealed that 63.7% are under the age group of 40-50 years;

8% are under 30-40 years and 28.3 % are under up to 30 years. In literacy status 46.7% of the respondents have only lower primary education; 23.3 % have upper primary education and only 10% are educated in high school and above, remaining 20% are illiterate. On marital status, 76.7% are married; 10% of them are divorced or widower and 13.3% are unmarried. Regarding the monthly income, 48.3% earn income of Rs. 4000-6000 and 25% have below Rs. 4000. The other 26.7% earn Rs. 6000 or more and they are employed under a Devaswom or temple/trust. Of the respondents 63.3% do not have any other source of income. With regard to savings, 86.7% do not have any savings.

There are many protective rules for the welfare and management of captive elephants but none for mahouts and their safety. Currently the Government is trying to insist on insurance schemes for mahouts, but as the majority of them are less educated they are not aware of insurance, its need or importance. In Kerala many cases are observed where when a mahout dies, his family is left in total penury. It is high time to make them aware of the need of savings and benefits of insurance.

We found that 68.3% of the respondent's family members are not favourable to this profession as it is a risky job. Out of 143 respondents (from total 200), who have sons, 31.7% are wishing to educate them while 30% wish to opt for other jobs for their sons. Only 10% are ready to make their son a mahout. Of the interviewed 61.7% feel a social stigma on account of being a mahout, and 73.3% feel they are neglected by the society. This is mainly because of the bitter experience with the public.

Because of the present problems and mahoutship is seen as a risky, less rewarding, stressful job, 56.7% thought of finding another job. But because of the affection to their animal or love towards this profession they are not able to do it. Regarding the attitude towards this profession by 68.4% see it as a fatal or risky job, 18.3% do it for livelihood and 13.3% considered it as an adventurous job.

Among the 200 respondents the majority i.e., 91.7% were attacked or have been injured by their elephant (Fig. 2), and only 8.3% were never attacked by an elephant. Of the respondents 56.7% were attacked more than 3 times and the remaining 35% were attacked 1-2 times. According to the nature of injuries sustained 45% of the respondents suffered major injuries, 26.7% minor and the remaining 20% grievous injuries or resulted in handicap. Regarding the duration of treatment 36.7% of the respondents have undergone 1-3 weeks treatment, 33.3% have undergone treatment for periods of 4 weeks and above (Fig. 3). It shows the severity of the injuries in that only 21.7% of the respondents have undergone treatments of less than one week. It was noticed that 63.4% of the respondents got financial help for the treatment but the remaining 28.3% of them did not get any financial help for their treatment.

Conclusion

Many of the mishaps suffered could be avoided if the mahouts are properly trained and also the elephants are not subjected to undue working loads. It is also felt that public life and their property can be made safer by the introduction of suitable laws.

The man-elephant conflict from tame elephants cannot be completely controlled merely through scientific training of mahouts. The mahouts should also be provided with all safety measures, risk coverage and cooperation from the public and the government. This study is intended to reveal the job risks and needs of mahouts to improve their life conditions. For the welfare of the public the welfare of mahouts and elephants is a must.

References

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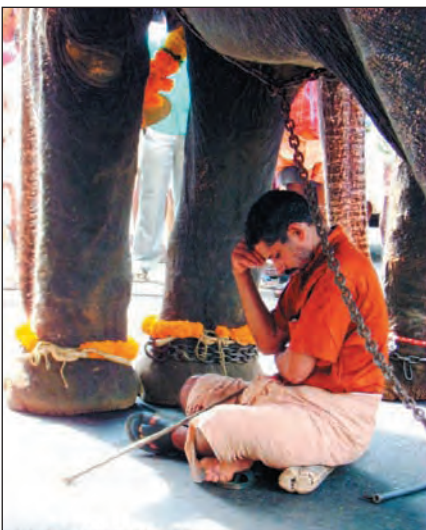


Figure 1. Mahout with his elephant.



Figure 2. A rogue elephant goring his mahout.



Figure 3. Wife feeding mahout who was gored by his elephant.