

## Ceremonial Elephants in Kerala India and Related Issues

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### Introduction

As in most other range countries, captive elephants were mostly used for logging in India. However, in 1980 the Government of India imposed a ban on logging of natural forests. The loss of logging work arising out of it created a crisis for working elephants. This mainly affected elephants in the east and north-eastern states of India since captive elephants in these states were used only for logging. In some states in southern India, especially Kerala, elephants were mainly used for ceremonial purposes in temples, and in some instances in churches and mosques. These 'ceremonial elephants' were not directly affected by the logging ban.

In Kerala, religious festivals are celebrated in the most grandiose manner. The number of elephants and their so called 'looks' is the benchmark measuring the pomp of the festival. Attractive elephants command higher rental charges and are highly prized. Since logging was stopped in India, there was a surplus of captive elephants in north-east India and they were sold for bargain prices. Consequently elephant traders purchased large numbers of elephants from north-east India. Initially, elephants were purchased from the famous Sonapur mela of Bihar and hence these animals were called 'Bihari Elephants'. Subsequently, all the elephants from the northeast, irrespective of their state of origin, have come to be called 'Bihari Elephants'. The state of Kerala had only around 200 elephants before the influx of the 'Bihari Elephants', after which it went up to about 700. This sudden increase in the elephant population in a short span of time caused a host of problems to elephant owners, as well as for the elephants. Subsequently the Government of Kerala imposed a ban on importing elephants from other states. The current population of

captive elephants in Kerala is about 600 and is likely to decrease over time. Some of the issues concerning the ceremonial elephants in Kerala are discussed below.

### Lack of experienced elephant mahouts

The advent of a large number of elephants in a short period of time meant a sudden demand for mahouts, especially the chief mahout or the 'Number One Mahout' or 'Command Mahout' as called in mahout parlance. The status of chief mahout is usually attained only after a number of years spent along with a senior experienced mahout as trainee, apprentice, etc. The influx of many elephants resulted in a shortage of experienced mahouts. This forced the owners to employ mahouts, who were second or third in the ladder of hierarchy, as chief mahouts. These mahouts were inexperienced. They did not have the traditional wisdom and knowledge of mahoutry, nor the knowledge of modern methods of animal training based on animal psychology. Their ignorance of good mahoutry skills led to cruel corporal punishment of elephants and elephants in turn also began to behave very aggressively. This resulted in very unfortunate instances like mahouts being gored to death, as well as elephants running amok especially during festivals. These mahouts rarely think that honing their skill is a must, and hence training programmes offered by different organisations were not taken seriously by these 'new generation' mahouts, as it was an unfelt need for them.

Alcoholism is a grave problem among mahouts. Mahouts too have their own problems like deplorable service conditions: poor pay, inadequate or no accident insurance, and lack of job security, to mention a few.

### **Lack of experienced elephant veterinarians**

Veterinarians that are experienced with elephant health and medicine are few. It is unfortunate to note that very few vets take up elephant practice since it is far less lucrative compared to normal domestic animal practice. It is also a fact that elephant management is not included in the veterinary curriculum even in the State of Kerala where captive elephants are plenty.

### **Exercise**

Lack of exercise is another problem. This is mostly experienced by temple elephants which are tied in the temple premises all day, day in and day out. Elephants need a daily walk of 4-5 km, or one hour to keep their feet healthy by proper circulation. For mahouts, it is an extra effort and they do not take it seriously. Taking elephants for a walk not only is good for the animal's health but also builds a better rapport between the mahout and the elephant resulting in a more tractable elephant. Inexperienced mahouts who are not confident about their wards do not take out the animal since it is risky to take an animal which is not under his full control.

### **Musth**

This is a big problem in Kerala. Most of the elephants in Kerala are tusked and are used for festivals. Income by hiring out the elephant is often the only income that is received by the owner for the upkeep of the animal. Onset of musth can reasonably be predicted by experienced mahouts. Elephants are to be tethered safely just prior to musth. But both the owner and the mahout defer this since this will deprive them of their income. Finally, the animal bolts and causes havoc. Even if the animal is tied in the case of prolonged musth, the elephant is taken out before the musth is fully over. This again is risky and dangerous.

### **Cruelty**

Too much punishment amounting to cruelty is practised by new mahouts who do not know how to handle their wards. They are under the impression that fear is the only way to keep the

dominance over the animal. Since elephants are highly intelligent animals with good memory, they retaliate when the opportunity comes. This is more frequent during musth when there is a reversal of dominance.

### **Elephant brokers**

Elephant brokers are a necessary evil. Event managers need 15-20 elephants for a festival. They need other accessories like elephant jewellery, and other ornamental things associated with the festival. Event managers cannot meet each and every owner and other sources who hire out these things. Here comes the role of the brokers. Brokers offer the animals as a package of elephant and its jewellery, including transportation to the site. Brokers come to an agreement with elephant owners for an amount for a season, and in-turn hire out the elephants for the festivals. So the brokers will try to make as much money as they could and this margin, after paying off the owners, forms their net profit. This results in a continuous use of elephants without any rest both for elephants as well as the mahouts, making both of them restless and temperamental. Since lots of money is involved in all this, there is a lot of foul-play too.

### **Off season neglect.**

The major festival season is only 5-6 months, and the busy season is only for 3 months. After the season elephants do not get any rental charges and owners often neglect their animals. Some owners leave the mahouts with small amounts for the upkeep of the animal. This is not only insufficient, but whatever is received as rent or service charges for the elephant is pocketed by the mahout. The elephant is not fed properly and the animal loses its condition rapidly.

### **Tuberculosis (TB)**

There was also an issue of elephants as a source of TB for human beings. But the latest studies show that there is no such threat and TB in elephants is a blind alley. Recent studies show that TB in elephants does not have much zoonotic importance.