



Training and Management of Elephants

Dr. Jacob V. Cheeran

Training of animals especially the elephant is a subject of large-scale debate. Generally many training methods involve cruel methods and elephant training is no exception to that. But training method practiced in South India does have a lot of plus points compared many other methods. Training of a newly captured one is done in an enclosure known as "Krall". This is also known as closed system.

What are the basic principles of animal training? How do animals respond to training? Why only certain species of animals can be trained easily and why not others? If the trainer understands the answers of these questions, training will be mentally stimulating and intellectually rewarding.

Hence before dealing training of elephants it is worthwhile to dwell upon basic principles of training.

Scientific Training

What is scientific training? Is there a universally approved training programme? The fact is that there is no training programme, which is universally approved.

Before going further let us distinguish between scientific training and training for scientific purpose. Scientists of various disciplines train animals for various purposes. They train various species, from insects to primates, including human beings for various purposes. Physiologists, Pharmacologists, and behavioural scientists form

major group of scientists who train the animals. Experiment of Pavlov, Ivan Petrovich on condition reflex in dogs is known to all students of Biology. Many if not most of animal responses are very akin to that. Thus, this knowledge will help tremendously an animal trainer. Animals are also trained for various other purposes like to help the blind, hunting, tracking the criminal, detect narcotics and for performances like in circuses.

Training essentially means the animal to respond positively to the message or command given by the trainer. There is a process of communication. Communication involves forming an idea, converting it into signals like auditory, visual or physical like percussion. To an intelligent animal facial expressions and modulated voice, convey a lot of message. Many animals even possess what we call the 6th sense.

When a trainer is expecting the animal to respond positively he should first have the objective in his mind and the means of achieving it. For every desired result, it is reinforced by a positive reinforcement by giving a treat. This in the case of newly captured elephant will usually be banana or sugar cane. Gradually these types of appreciation by treats becomes words of appreciation, patting and similar actions. These types of mental reinforcement have a great role in intelligent animal like elephant. After achieving the desired level of reinforcement the trainer proceeds to the next level of training. Trainer should be aware of the anatomical limitations of the animal. Classical example is failure of trainers to teach talking by the sub human primates. They could not talk since their voice box was incapable of reproducing human syllables. But they learned the sign language easily and attained proficiency too. At the same many "talking birds" like parakeets and myna can easily imitate human voice although they are not intelligent. Imitation and repetition are two important basic things in acquiring a skill and retaining it. The trainer and the trainee will work as a team.

Acquisition of skill is reinforced by positive reinforcement. Negative reinforcements are used to reduce repetitive mistakes. Positive reinforcements can be considered as deposits in a bank account and negative reinforcements as withdrawals. Hence a mahout who uses punishment very often is living on "overdraft" and so lives dangerously. Although great strides have been made in the psychology of learning not much can be assessed objectively in the case of animals.

Animals that live in the nature in social group like herd or pack maintain dominance hierarchy or what is called as a pecking order. The dominant animal

Dr. Jacob V. Cheeran

Professor (Rtd)

135, Nehru Nagar,

Kuriachira

Thrissur-6, Kerala





establishes a command over the animals lower in the ladder of hierarchy. In the case of elephants it is the senior most cow, since elephants maintain a matriarchal system. But cats which lives independently in the nature are difficult to train and make them to obey the commands. We have already discussed the need to develop a close relationship between the mahout and the elephant. It is not very easy as in the case of dog and its master. In dogs several breeds are developed depending upon the need and the purpose to which they are put into use.

Such breed variations do not exist in elephants. Not only that if a particular dog doesn't come up to the level expected of it, then it is discarded. This can not happen in the case of elephants. Mahout must be able to establish his dominance over the elephant to feel that the mahout is smarter at the same time loving and affectionate partner. Rather, mahout is a senior partner, who is firm, but not cruel. This type of relationship will lead to a positive response from the elephant like obedience to command, love and affection.

Like human beings all animals are also different in their qualities and ability to learn different skills. There are easy to train and difficult to train elephants. Age is also another factor. Old elephants are difficult to train. But a wild bull (Makhna) which has killed 12 persons was captured by drug immobilisation and trained successfully at Mudumali WLS, Tamil Nadu, India.

The result from the combination of good mahout and good elephant is marvellous. A bad mahout can easily spoil a good elephant also. It is considered that a short-tempered mahout and patient elephant and vice versa may get along well. If both of them are short-tempered the result is naturally disastrous.

A well trained may be an elephant in the initial period, can easily be spoiled if it gets into the hands of an incompetent mahout. It is very easy to learn bad habits. Unlike other animals like dogs it is practically difficult to discard an elephant because it is of poor temperament or inability to learn and obey commands. He is tied round the clock and round the year and turns out to be liability to the owner and cruel experience to the elephant. Very often mahouts complain that after, all the days' work is over including the lumbering, bathing and scrubbing and final feeding, it is very difficult to make the animal to do even a minor work even if coaxed. There is more than one reason for this. First reason is that it is not easy to explain to the elephant why this exigency arose. Another is that, most of the activities of the elephant or for that instances any animal are in a conditioned manner and hence it becomes difficult to change the sequence of events. These changes in sequences put the animal into stress and often elephant will not "obey" the commands. Mahout who is not very familiar with the elephant's mood or psychology looses the patients and tends to punish the elephant. The elephant remains adamant, which makes the situation from bad to worse.

Should an elephant be punished at all? This is a question often asked. There are two different schools of thought. One extreme is that love and affection can

control elephant simply and other extreme says that obedience comes only by the stick. People who believes in the "love only" theory do not have enough practical experience and second category are unskilled sadists and will be avenged by the elephant and may not survive to take revenge.

"Elephant never forgets" this saying is true and people who are familiar with elephant knows it. Actually the physical an anatomical storage space for memory in elephants is more than that of human beings. But the "functional storage space" evaluation needs more studies. In any case one thing is sure, that the elephants' memory is incredible. So naturally elephants remember good as well as bad things. The biggest problem of aggressive behaviour by an elephant towards a Mahout is the "elephantine magnitude" of the aggression, resulting in serious injury, permanent disability or event death of mahout. There had been instances were in elephants mutilate the dead body in such a manner that it becomes a mass of flesh or torn into pieces and strewn all over the area. In certain instances even the body can not be removed since the elephant keeps a watch and vigil over the dead body.

Let us have a look at the initial training period after capturing. Newly captured animals do not know what is and what for is the punishment. Then how are the first lessons taught? Elephants are rewarded (positive reinforcement) even if they blunder into the right. Elephant repeats this response to get further positive reinforcement, which is often a treat with plantain or sugar cane. With every repetition, the activity i.e. response to command get reinforced. Meanwhile any mistake during the training is followed by a negative reinforcement, a mild or strong punishment depending upon the degree or level of "misconduct". This sort of punishment need not be physical or corporal. It could be a reprimand with properly modulated voice, refuse to give a treat or any similar action. Elephant being an intelligent animal such a sort of punishment will be driven home well. A timely intervention to control an elephant's dangerous movement by an elephant hook is absolutely essential in appropriate situations. This is all the more important in a crowd, like a festival to avoid disastrous result.

We discussed the memory of elephants and occasional remorseless revenge. At the same time instances are many wherein elephant shows its love and affection not only to its mahouts but also to his family, owner and several others, who treat the elephants with tender, love & care. Probably it can be said that love and hate are two sides of a coin.

Handling an elephant is not like handling a motor car or a machine. Moods or emotions do not govern machines. Response of an elephant will be influenced by its both physical and emotional status. Hence if the partnership of mahout and elephant is to succeed mahout should have the skill to react and respond depending upon the situation.

A person who is knowledgeable about elephant behaviour need not be a good mahout. Elephant has not





learned any code of conducts to be complied with! Achievements of a good partnership with man and animal have become legends in history. Alexander the great and his horse Bucephalus and Ranapratap Singh and Chetak are few examples. Similar examples are many about elephants also.

Animals, especially intelligent ones need environment enrichment. In animal keeping humane handling, just does not include, meeting the physical needs like food, water and shelter? Poor environmental condition leads to stereotype movements by the elephants. This is often observed in elephant stables where they are tethered continuously and no environment enrichment is provided. Environment enrichment itself has grown into a science in itself.

Ten Commandments for a Good Mahout

- 1 Elephants' welfare is the first priority
- 2 Each elephant is different and needs different type of handling suited to the animal.
- 3 Elephants' welfare should not be compromised with the owners interest
- 4 Try to learn about your elephant at every occasion
- 5 Take every opportunity to fine tune your skills
- 6 Be firm but need not be cruel
- 7 Earning respect and love from the animals as well as command over it, is a continuous process.
- 8 Mahout should always establish his dominance over the elephants
- 9 Learn about other elephants, share your experiences with others and continue to upgrade excellence in your profession
- 10 Never take any unnecessary risk or negligence about the safety of the self. A fraction of a second is enough to cause disastrous result. Elephants' aggressive behaviour is not like the bite by a dog or a kick from a cow.

Often mahouts' comment: What is so important about learning for a mahout? It is all just a few days apprenticeship with another mahout and the rest is by your self.

Mahoutry is not just a simple skill. It not only needs skill but also quick reaction instant response immediate decision-making and above all a good common sense. The scientific arts from sleight of hand to surgery are both theory and practice. But it needs reading, learning and sharing of experience and expertise. As a profession clients (Elephant) interest is of primary importance. As a profession, continued up-gradation of knowledge and skill is your responsibility.

Tail piece

Two students were given thorough lessons on mahoutry. Both of them went to handle elephant. One of them handled the elephant and another one was "handled" by the elephant.



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General Convenor, Nila Fest 2002,

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