



Training the Mahouts

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The captive elephant is the symbolic image of a secularist culture at least in Kerala. The elephant is Lord Ganapathi to Hindus and hence its importance in temple rituals and festivals. Nevertheless, the caporoned elephant has become an important item in Muslim and Christian festivals as well.

The number of festivals or livelihood activities involving elephants are comparatively more in the central districts of Kerala, namely Thrissur, Ernakulam and Palakkad. Their population hence tends to be more in these parts of the state. Though the elephant is in domesticity and looked after by mahouts for whom it is the source of livelihood, it is only considered as a wild animal unlike other livestock species obviously due to rigorous wild life protection policies.

It has been a pleasure as well as displeasure keeping elephants. It is undoubtedly a pleasure to experience a docile one but displeasure to experience a daredevil. However, we tend to forget dare devilry whatsoever accidents and sorrow that has brought. It raises chicken or egg problem when we also consider the part that torturing these companions is too common. Have lack of know how and do how apart from right attitude been many a times the precedents of dare devilry?

Recent observations by the authors reveal that there was a serious lack of know how as evident from some least known practices to mahouts. These were methods to be adopted while taking elephant in hot weather, water requirement per day, precautions to be taken while experts make use of capture gun, signs of water deficiency, techniques of first aid for wounds, right methods of mounting on elephants and sitting etc. Similarly, elephant owners were found to be seriously lacking know how regarding causes of impaction, maximum weight that can be lifted by an elephant, minimum quantity of drinking water required for an adult elephant per day, maximum walkable distance with maximum bearable weight, normal thickness of restraining chains, normal length of neck rope etc.

Further, there were many practices least adopted by mahouts which indicated lack of right attitude apart from lack of do how and know how. For instance, procedures to be adopted while the elephant is made to walk a long time during hot weather, making the elephant to carry only less than 500 kg at a stretch, usage of chains of thickness 1/2", 5/8" or 3/4", making to walk below 6 km with the maximum weight it can bear, properly restraining during festival performance, providing at least 250 lit of drinking water per day, precautionary measures while caning the hind limbs, methods used to correct small mistakes and mischiefs of elephants, precautionary measure while using ankush, methods to be adopted to reduce the degree of seriousness of impaction once its symptoms are noticed etc.

It was known from the proportionate random sample of 50 each of owners, first and second mahouts studied that none of the elephant owners had undergone a formal training on elephant management. Only a first mahout and three second mahouts had attended a formal training programme organised by the elephant welfare association of Kerala perhaps only one of its kind in the country. To compound the issue further 30 and 26 percentages of the first and second mahouts respectively were illiterates.

R.C.Lair in his famous book "Gene Astray, the care and management of Asian elephants in domesticity" published by FAO wrote that poor mahoutship was the most frightening problem faced by the domesticated elephants in Thailand, India and Sri Lanka. Mahouts themselves have admitted this. For instance, Ponnappan a known mahout of Kerala had admitted that most of the injuries to elephants were

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