



Human - captive elephant conflicts during festivals in Kerala*

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Elephant, the largest terrestrial mammal attracts the attention of all categories of the society. According to the latest report of International Elephant Foundation, the total Asian elephant population in the world is about 40000 only as against 5 lakhs African elephants. Analysis of database available with Elephant Welfare Association, Thrissur revealed that the total captive elephant population in Kerala is about 700 and the sex ratio is 9:1 (Male 630 and female 70). Out of the male elephants about 618 (88 %) are tuskless and the rest makhanas (tuskless male). From this it is very clear that the people of Kerala have a preference to tuskless than cow elephants.

The elephant ownership pattern in Kerala is very unique in character that majority (76%) of the elephants are owned by private individuals and the number of elephants in their possession ranges from 1-28. Next to private individuals is the temple trusts and Guruvayoor Devaswom is the biggest one in this category. The Kerala State Forest Department also has captive

elephants in their camps at Konni, Kodanad and Muthanga.

The utilisation pattern of captive elephants in Kerala is also very different from other areas. Even though elephants are used for many purposes, in Kerala the most prominent area of utilisation is festival, that too in temples. Arattupuzha pooram is the festival in Kerala with maximum number of elephants. Very large number of people usually gathers in the temple premises during the festival ceremonies. Virtually a group of tuskless mingled with a huge crowd is the usual sight in most of the festivities and as a result there is every chance for human-elephant conflict during festivals. A major factor that increases the number of elephants paraded in festivals is the competition between the various factions of the society in sponsoring maximum number of elephants for the parade.

Table 1. Captive elephants of Kerala – basic data

Total no. of captive elephants in Kerala	700
Sex ratio (male: female)	9: 1
Total no. of bull elephants	630
Total no. of cow elephants	70
Total no. of tuskless	618 (88 %)
Total no. of makhanas	12 (only < 2%)

Table 2. Ownership pattern of captive elephants of Kerala

Ownership particulars	No. of elephants (approx)
Temple elephants	150 (1-62)
Private individuals	530 (1-28)
Forest department	20

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During the last five-year period, a total of 29 minor conflicts and one major conflict involving human casualty were recorded during major festivals in Kerala. The major reasons leading to human-elephant conflicts in captivity include, prolonged period of parade especially during hot summer days with out rest in between, reduced feeding / watering / sleeping facilities during festivals, prolonged walk between festivals, overcrowding of elephants in festivals, work on all days during festival season, ill-treatment by mahouts (especially in an inebriated mood), parading of elephants in musth and parading of elephants with wounds and diseases. Behavioural peculiarities of certain elephants (for example, some bulls are notorious for goring the neighbouring elephants during parade / procession) also pave way to the occurrence of conflict in certain cases. Teasing by inebriated public and irritation / fear aroused

Table 3. Details of temples with more number of elephants

Name of temple/trust/board	No. of elephants (approx)
Guruvayoor Devaswom	62
Travancore Devaswom Board	38
Cochin Devaswom Board	12
Thiruvambady Devaswom	5
Nayarambalam Nair Karayogam	5
Paramakkavu Devaswom	4
Sankarankulangara Devaswom	4
Kuttankulangara Devaswom	4

Table 4. Details of human-elephant conflicts during major festivals in Kerala

Name of festival	No. of elephants paraded	Size of crowd (thousands)	Incidence of conflicts during the last 5 years	
			Minor	Major*
Arattupuzha Pooram	70	200-300	2	-
Paripally Temple Festival	70	100-200	3	-
Parkkadi Pooram	64	100-200	3	-
Thrissur Pooram	60	400-500	5	-
Pattambi Mosque Festival	60	100-200	5	-
Adupootty Church Festival	50	100-200	2	-
Chinakkathoor Pooram	45	100-200	3	-
Iringalakkuda Temple Festival	17	150-200	3	-
Thripoonithura Temple Festival	15	150-200	3	1

* Including death of human being from fire works during festivals can also precipitate conflict issues.

Strict veterinary examination of the elephants prior to the festival and issue of fitness certificate by experienced veterinarians, strict examination of the mahouts before the parade to rule out intoxication with alcohol (utilising breath analyser), enforcement of rules and regulations to prevent parading of elephants in musth, proper restrain during parade, creation of awareness among mahouts, temple authorities and elephant lovers, re-scheduling of the parading time (preferably during morning and evening hours) without interference to the temple/church rituals, arrangement of security measures with tranquillisation equipments,

imposing restriction on the quantum of fire works during festivals, providing shade in areas where elephants are paraded for prolonged period during hot hours of the day to reduce heat stress, sprinkling of cold water on the floor where the elephants are retained for prolonged period during hot hours and providing plenty of feedstuffs during parade time are some of the measures that can be strictly adopted to reduce the incidence of human-captive elephant conflicts. If elephants are to be continuously paraded, it is better to change the elephants at definite intervals to reduce the burden. The basic solution to this evil is nothing other than better management, avoiding ill treatment to the elephants.

