

Spots and Dots on Trunks. The Elephant World Unspeakable

Foreword by
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When winged beings sail down from space to earth, it can really only be elephants. And if they land in the trees with their unspeakably heavy weight and break whole branches, then perhaps they have sprung from the hands of Brahma. Tradition leaves open what the god actually intended to do with these monstrous, mischievous creatures.

To want to write a book about elephants is like a travel adventure that leads us through the universe of these gray giants. Similar to us humans in many ways, elephants show humour, compassion, self-awareness, playfulness, and depression. And they are loved, worshipped, feared, hated, tormented, and brutally exploited. Although the object of study by science, and research and countless publications, elephants are and remain, above all, legendary beings who are reluctant to reveal their secrets, or whose secrets we humans have been working on for generations. Elephants show concern for other species and have been known to rescue trapped animals, even not belonging to their own families. The elephant herds are led by matriarchs and thus belong to the closest knot societies in the animal kingdom. Births are major social events, as the cycles of the first-time giving birth females, are often next to one another in short succession.

Many scientists are puzzling about their behaviour, leading and lead to decades of studies, for example, when elephants gather near their dead. A recent review of documented field observations of elephants at carcasses reveals patterns of elephants' behaviour towards their dead, regardless of the strength of former relationships with the deceased individual. The most common behaviours observed were approaching the dead, touching and examining the carcass. This behaviour sends chills up my spine. Would we show reverence to trees illegally mowed down, or towards any dead animal? Would we do this to our forests or lost wildlife? Furthermore, our questions would be, Do elephants generate strength from grief about their dead? Is mourning a common social behaviour that strengthens the community? Do elephants lose these behaviours in captivity? Can we associate temporal gland streaming by a young female standing at her mother's carcass with higher emotions? We lift eyebrows to find out about the motivations underlying observed behaviours but, they are hard to determine. From the ethological and psychological perspective, so many questions remain unanswered while we, at ground level, still have to fight violations and cruelty against elephants.

Elephants fight for their survival as a species, and about their elephant-ness, and against any submission by humans hands, be it on tourist rides, safaris, temples, or as working elephants, in zoos, or circuses or at festival sites. Their greatness makes it repeatedly one more time clear again how little, certain sections of the population, understand about them, and perhaps this may be the precise reason for their ruthless treatment by us, humans why we treat them so ruthlessly. What reaches us are stories and observations of encounters between people and the gray giants, with

the same question about their relationship. The two-thousand-year-old fable of the six blind men, which the Raja in Savatthi ordered to his court to let them touch the giant animal in order to learn about his being, illustrates an individual approach. The answers couldn't be more different. There was talk of a wall (body), a fan (ears), rope and brush (tail with tassel), and a pipe (trunk), and a column (leg). The impression is literally obvious, science or elephantology is another, seventh being in the great fable about the six blind men who touch the elephant with the question of who they are, not what they are.

The relationship between humans and elephants has existed since time immemorial, when both were still forest dwellers. For half a century this relationship has been subject to rapid change. The picture has changed completely, unfortunately, not for the better. The health and welfare of the elephants have given way to their owners' greed for money and pleasure. The demand from elephants at festivals has skyrocketed and has made Sonapur mela in Bihar the main hub for the elephant trade in India. Too many elephants have been and are illegally caught and 80% of them are illegally brought across the borders from the northeastern states of India. Mismanagement makes elephant husbandry in India appear more than questionable, and casts a long shadow in their future, because the prospect of improvement is only disproportionate to the massive needs of the gray colossi, who wither beyond species-appropriate keeping. In captivity, their high communication skills, their intelligence and their needs in relation to the wild can, in no way, be taken into account.

The giant proboscis are not just eating machines and messy eaters, they are also equipped with the special feature of an excellent memory that remembers its opponents as well as their smallest weaknesses. The use of tools, such as twigs or sticks to scratch, makes us smile again and again, because with it you can get to the otherwise inaccessible parts of the body such as the neck or back. Then the twig is tucked behind the ear like the architect's pencil, and remains ready for use again at any time for both humans and elephants, and the elephant has a free hand again to quickly steal a fruit or vegetable from the bucket when its mahout is happening turn his back. Often, the question arises about who is studying whose behaviour here.

Elephants. They are the epitome of power, and their majestic beauty should be exaggerated by artists, like painting people, decorating them with colorful cloths, worshiping them like gods in temples and at festivities. This omnipresent animal giant is an indispensable part of the cultural history of India. Kerala alone hosts over 2000 festivals per year, with the temple festival in the Guruvayoor temple in Thrissur being probably the most colourful and largest; in any case it is a festival in which Lord Krishna is best worshipped, with the greatest number of elephants.

Elephants running amok at festivals like Thrissur leave traces of terror and panic. It is not uncommon for the adored gray giants to have killed ten or more people, mostly mahouts, which does not seem to damage their reputation. Techikottukavu Ramachandran, the biggest temple elephant (10 feet four inches high, 314 centimeters shoulder height) in the South of India, which I was allowed to immortalize in my film with the title "The Elephant Kitchen", already existed in the years 1988 to 2012 killed ten people, including five mahouts.

However, no one seems to draw any conclusions from this. Since the *musth* period of many bulls happens at the same time and falls precisely during the festival season, the increased testosterone level ensures "unleashed" emotions of the animal giants and turns every hierarchy upside down. The elephant dominates the scene; his anger usually discharges at his mahout, who often fails to escape quickly enough to a safe distance, which makes matters worse; because the rage of the left alone elephant turns against the next best who stands in the way, even if it is another elephant. I remember a scene in which a frantic bull pushes another elephant from the field, with a snort like a bulldozer pushing a pile of earth left behind.

The job of the elephant keeper or mahout today is more like a suicide mission than the honorable profession just a few decades ago, as reflected in this book. Many of the mahouts are underpaid, addicted to alcohol, have unstable private circumstances and only take on such a job because of the few rupees or because no other job can be found; they have no idea about elephant keeping. That is a great disadvantage for both elephants and humans.

If mahouts are known to be the carriers of the stories of their elephants, they still understand little or nothing about their animals. Untutored young men, who lack psychological and biological knowledge, are quick to use violence if the pachyderms don't pay heed or parry or disregard their mahout as a person of respect. The aforementioned frequent change of mahouts also contributes to this. Violence works as a substitute for a non-functioning relationship between the two, the mahout and the elephant, which has been depleted of elephant knowledge. The injuries are mostly fatal to the mahouts, of which there are several hundred every year across Asia. The stab wounds suffered by elephants from *Ankush* or the use of knives are deep and heal extremely poorly. If they are not treated medically, which is usually the case, they are excruciatingly painful and sooner or later, also fatal.

While some of the ten thousand people reflexively protect their ears against the exploding fireworks at the lavish festivals in Kerala, sensitive elephant ears have to endure the detonations right next to their ears without reacting. They stand like pillars of salt next to the exploding fireworks, as if they were bursting balloons, at most. It can be assumed that their eardrums suffer severe and painful permanent damage. If the increased testosterone level disinhibits the elephant's unexpected powers, then any restraint or obedience on the part of the animal becomes obsolete. He'll snort everything out of the way that gets in his way.

Techikottukava Ramachandran, also called Gajakesari, is in the musth for about five long months a year, but he has a good mahout who has looked after him for fifteen years, as also Dr. T.S. Rajeev, Center for Elephant Studies in Kerala, and personal veterinarian of the animal giant. The elephant gives me the horror of my life when it suddenly kneels to the ground about a step away from me. When my gaze carefully climbs up the elephant like a climber on a steep vertical wall, longingly hoping for the end of the wall, I see the huge head of the bull with the clearly watery gland towering over me. The gigantic animal, whose head hits the white festival cloud of Kerala, kneels down; cheered by the crowded crowd of his followers, who like to have a few rupees in their pockets to honour their elephant deity. His mahout, thin as a beanstalk, barely reaches his thigh. His foot is just bigger than a single toenail of the gray giant. He is holding the *ankush* in his hand, the front end of which is stuck into

the ground with the polished brass point. The fan base of Gajakesari is large and many already gather around the two of them cheering and screaming, with arms stretched high and chanting the rhythm of the drums. The elephant is saddled and decked out for the upcoming procession. As the bearer of the deity, the deity, Gajakesari is undoubtedly the chosen elephant king, and will carry the Idol of God three or more times around the temple center, in whose inner shrine, the sanctum sanctorum called Garbhagraha, Maha Vishnu is venerated. Obviously, its owner has decided not to miss out on the lucrative business and calmly overlooks the potential danger of the musth-have condition of his high-earner. From 1922 to 1976 his ancestor, the legendary Guruvayoor Kesavan, to whom a chapter is devoted in this book, took over this role in Thrissur Pooram in his place.

Many mahouts and elephant owners decide against any precautionary measures out of profitability, even though their elephants are in musth. This irrationality has its price, however, and usually ends fatally. A king has the right to kill. And the king is the elephant, as the old Mathangaleela put it, whose reading means something like elephant sport or elephant games. The life of a mahout or even a helper is worth next to nothing in Kerala. Elefanten's insurance companies provide clear information about this. A dead elephant is worth more than a live one. There are no penalties and the insurance sums are high. Lessons are also drawn, and ethical values are obsolete. It is's part of the big business with the giant animals. Good mahouts are rare these days. Bad or with no payment at all, the mahouts constantly switching to other elephants, whose owners promising higher payments at the beginning, increase the risk of accidents. In addition, there is a lack of knowledge about the animals and the constant consumption of alcohol by the keepers, which makes it impossible to establish a good and lasting relationship between the mahout and the elephant.

This additional stress is excruciating for the animals, due to the generally high testosterone level. Some elephant bulls react with lethargy (possibly drugged for safety to humans), however, with others an unpredictable and dominant, even aggressive behaviour is observed. Only a few mahouts are allowed to tie their elephants in the forest during the *musth* period. The assistants then tied the elephants' front legs tightly together (hobbled), and the long chain was attached to the animal's back leg. The elephants hop through the forest and can be quickly tracked down due to the long chain. The freedom of movement for the elephant animals in *the musth* is less than that of a duck in a pond. Nobody, except the animal rights activists, regards this stress for the animals as cruelty to animals. Nevertheless, elephants chained in the forest show less aggressive behaviour during the *musth* period than elephants at parades and festivities, since they are isolated in a calm and natural environment. They are much more relaxed in the forest.

Post-traumatic stress disorders can be observed in almost all elephants in captivity; it is the stereotypical bobbing and swaying, a misconduct, and a sure sign of the lack of freedom of movement of elephants in captivity which incidentally could never be observed in wild elephants. For wild elephants, being locked in captive conditions, means a lifelong, never-ending trauma after the break-in. Exiled into slavery for to give their best animal-possible and to fulfill the human benefit that we have imposed

on them, „domesticated“ elephants degenerate into a shadow of their former wild glory. The elephants in captivity are literally going insane or become lifeless robots. In the course of their more than 3-4,000 year history of development, elephants have not left their wild life status, even when they are born and grow up in human custody. They have never been domesticated like cattle, horses, cats, or dogs; their generations have not been modified to serve any particular human purpose. Condemned to spend the rest of their lives in chains, fear and terror, above all a life in solitary confinement and prison in zoos, temples or on private property, in which they are forced to earn their living and that of their owners. They have to work in tourism in Jaipur or in timber hauling in many states in Kerala under inhumane conditions. They are ghettoized, kept in solitary confinement, tortured and condemned to a life in chains.

Young elephants as young as five years old are broken into, which means that after they are captured from the jungle, they are tortured and humiliated in a kraal (called phajaan in Thailand) for between six and twelve days until they give up exhausted, and collapse . From then on, they will be exposed to lifelong human abuse. This panic and fear of further agony caused by people or the mahout, who alternately once torments him and then saves him from further agony by giving him food and water again and leading him out of the kraal, forces even the strongest elephant for all future into abject obedience; unless he is -perhaps- in *the musth* and opposes humans. How does such subservience of the elephants, who absolutely want to avoid any further infliction of pain, behave with that half of the brain of the animal that previously (before the break-in) could easily assert itself in the wild? Elephants are exposed to this permanent initial trauma, which is followed by countless numbers in the course of their life in captivity, which is usually far too short. The current system of elephant keeping unfortunately hardly allows innovative changes. It is hardened, stubborn and corrupt. With its lack of understanding and mismanagement, it finally brings many elephants into the grave prematurely, especially bulls that are just 30 or 40 years old.

There are two standard works in Indian elephantology that are frequently mentioned in this book.

The Hastayurveda, with its over one hundred and seventy-one chapters (171) and in it occurring 12,000 verses or *slokas*, also called *shoklams*, in which the author Sage Palakappya deals with the characteristics of elephants and their diseases such as fever, eye diseases, dental diseases, etc. as well as the trapping and taming of wild-caught animals, as well as the diagnosis and application of Ayurvedic medicine. It is divided into four major sections as follows: 1. Maharogasthanam, 2. Kshudrarogasthanam, 3. Sallyasthanam and, 4. Utharasthanam.

The hour of birth of the elephants is ascribed in Hastayurveda to the two hands of Brahma, who holds a cosmic egg in his left hand, from which seven male elephants are born, and from his right hand seven female elephants arise.

The Mathangaleela, recorded by Neelakanta, an ancient book frequently mentioned by the author, seems to be the basis of the author of this book's willingness to associate. In the translation of Jacob Cheeran's Sanskrit into Malayalam, this standard work of the then elephantology was made available to the general public in Kerala and has since gained popularity. The Mathangaleela with its 12 chapters and

around 253 *stanzas* is said to be 200 years old, but is often assigned to an even older period, as the elephants were thought to have the ability to fly.

This myth, at first a curse, which in turn became a curse during the Enlightenment, brought them together with their weight to earth in order to serve man from now on. Due to the accessibility of this work to the general public in Kerala, the traditions, in spite of modern knowledge, ignore species-appropriate housing conditions for the giant animals, and seem even to have hardened against modern scientific findings. The division of elephants, a Schedule 1 animal of the wild animals, into *castes* not only seems outdated, and but to a certain extent is out of place in the case of elephants or has been assigned differently. As an extended arm of some popular traits, as they are known for example in horses, cattle or dog breeding, it seems to find an excessive application here e.g. for example elephants are preferred if they have long legs (deer caste), or nicely coloured, speckled points on trunk or forehead. If at all trunk and tail are long with a pronounced tassel and the tusks are well formed and powerful (manda caste), or the profitable shoulder height puts all smaller elephants in the shade or eliminates them. The valuation of an elephant rises and falls with the criteria similar to an exhibited cow in a cattle fair on a mela. The price drops dramatically when the animal giant has one-eyed, is deaf, and has bad manners, only half an ear or only one tusk.

Bhadra caste, manda caste, deer caste, mixed caste find correspondence in the castes of the Brahmanas, the very heroic Kshatriyas, the ruling class, Vaishyaas and the Shudras, the lowest caste to which artists and workers are assigned to serve to the other three higher-ranking castes should serve. The Brahmins were allowed to farm and raise livestock, whereas the Vaishyaas were mostly merchants who traded in agricultural products or breeding. These four castes are mentioned in the Mathangaleela. However, there is not such a thing as a *caste* for elephants that they would assign to themselves. This was just another way of "humanizing" elephants. Genealogically, however, the interesting question remains why the caste system was used with the elephants. Was it due to their intelligence?

The striking proboscis have moved the human imagination for millennia. *Elephas Maximus Indicus* and *Loxodonta Africana* are the result of more than 50 million years of evolution, and we have only just begun to study and understand their behaviour and role in an endangered ecosystem.

The enchantment, which still emanates from the old traditions, must not hide the current grievances, and leaves contemporary revision and processing of the problem to be desired, with regard to especially those wild animals or elephants in captivity, and cannot (sic!) be maintained. Too much is at stake, too many elephants are constantly dying from the consequences of the most miserable housing conditions, especially in Kerala, but also in other states, and the species as such is listed on the IUCN's list of endangered species. Their massive, primeval appearance has not stopped us humans from enslaving and subjugating them. We brought them to the brink of extinction by breaking their will to live, destroying their habitat, and treating them for life as our subjects, who are often worth less than a piece of dirt. Elephants are not breeding animals, it has to be explicitly mentioned again, they are wild animals, even if about 2675 elephants are currently living in captivity in India (as of MoEF & CC info to SC 2019), and breeding has been tried often enough; it can be described as a failure. Elephants have until today, not been domesticated.

So it is up to us, humans, whether and how we want to handle the story, once begun by gods and orphans, demystified, to our descendants and continue to tell. In favour of a respectful and life-affirming ecology of elephants and humans, which puts the preservation and protection of the natural habitat of these giant animals as top priority, our concern must be the management and conservation of these last and largest mammals on our planet. As keystone species, elephants shape and modify the habitat in favour of other species with which they share their habitat. Experiencing and studying elephants in the wild is like a spiritual experience that will captivate you for life and that never ends as long as elephants are among us.

Elephants are hunted and shot by the thousands every year for their ivory, caught in traps, run over by trains, electrocuted by high-voltage wires, and lose their lives through poaching and untreated diseases in captivity, poisoned in retaliation and deprived of their habitat by people encroaching their forests. Entire elephant families have witnessed such mutilations. We can assume that these mutilations are deeply engraved in their collective memory, similar to us humans. At this point, we should be aware that just a few decades ago neither African nor Indian societies drastically decimated elephant herds or other wild life species through hunting and thus brought them to the brink of extinction. The conflict between humans and elephants is already raging as a conflagration if the illegal exploitation of resources in the elephant areas is not prevented.

We will not be able to undo what is broken, but we can stop to continue inflicting cruelty to elephants by understanding their ancient social bonds and behaviour and our relation within, the very moment we stop inflicting cruelty to ourself. We should accept elephants as equal beings as well as giraffes, dolphins, whales and other species that are allowed to claim a right to their habitat. Perhaps we should open one eye together, as the seventh blind man, so to speak, to study this wonderful being. We're just a heartbeat away from extinction.

Let us hope this book will once again cause us all to stand up for these battered, fabled beings. In the 21st century, with all its challenges in terms of climate and species protection, increasing epidemics, and thus a rapidly increasing risk of losing the delicate balance on this planet in a very short time, elephants in captivity should disappear from the scene in India once and for all. This hope of the MoEF & CC in India in relation to the 103 elephants in Jaipur should be emphasized. With losing the elephant herds living in the wild, we lose the elephants inside us, just as the colonization and destruction of indigenous peoples has already caused irreparable disturbance in us. That destruction shaped our behavioural patterns as well as that of the elephants and is anchored in our cultural memory as well as in that elephant memory that once knew how to fly.

We wish everyone a safe and inspiring journey, and a happy landing while reading this dazzling book.

Ahimsha

