

## **Tuberculosis, foot rot, paralysed legs, stereotypic behaviour, blindness - Elephants in Jaipur have got it all!**

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*“In a world that is older and more complete than ours, they move in a ready and perfect way, endowed with the expansion of the senses that we have lost or never attained, living with voices that we will never hear. You are not our brothers, not our subordinates; other nations are trapped with us in the same network of time and life.”*

*Henry Beston*

Ever since we keep elephants in captivity, we have faced a complex and challenging task that almost no one can meet. The biological and psychological needs of such a powerful and intelligent animal are almost always neglected and ignored. We failed to comprehend that by breaking their spirits and bodies to adapt them to human needs, we have destroyed a beautiful, wild and complex creature, in many ways, superior to Man.

Captive elephants have been a part of Indian history and culture for thousands of years. Lord Ganesha is most loved and worshipped in the pantheon of Hindu gods, even outside the country. Nevertheless, just as old is the trauma and story of the captive elephants tamed by man for his royal, religious, military, entertainment and commercial needs.

In less than fifty years, the Asian elephant has suddenly become the subject of scientific research based on habitat destruction, rising conflicts with humans, diseases and the threat of extinction. It is now, even more than in earlier times, become increasingly questionable to keep elephants in captivity for entertainment and commerce. With the recent medical findings of the elephants used for joy rides in Jaipur, Rajasthan, we enter a shocking invisible world of suffering, pain, ignorance and greed.

Testing for mycobacterial tuberculosis infection should be an integral part of the preventive medicine program of every elephant-holding facility. The attending veterinarians should review and update this aspect of the preventive medicine program annually. The documentation should be attached to the elephant owners' certificates. (The certificates may be false, but this piece of paper is all that is there to tie the elephants to their owners and give validity to the former's imprisonment).

In 2018, the Forest Department in Jaipur was advised by the Animal Welfare Board of India (AWBI) to take mandatory measures after examining and publishing its detailed report in March of the same year. The report revealed that out of 91 screened elephants for Mycobacterium tuberculosis (Mtb), 40+ did not cooperate since they were not trained for the procedure. Ten elephants tested Mtb positive. Furthermore, the blood picture of 62 animals showed abnormally few neutrophils, leading to increased susceptibility to infection. Interestingly, 71 animals showed eosinophilia suggestive of internal parasitic infestation. Later the post-mortem reports of some elephants further reinforced these findings.

The reality, however, overlooks and ignores all the reports and veterinary advice. It is business as usual for the owners, who live effectively off this dismal elephant slave trade.

At the time of writing this piece, in Hathigaon, an elephant village in Jaipur, no regular medical practices were in place which could reduce the spread and transmission of diseases in elephants. Neither were regular medical checkups or any manner of elephant husbandry practices applied. Mycobacterium tuberculosis is a reverse zoonosis which spreads in both directions, from humans to animals like cows, goats or elephants and from elephants back to humans and other animals. Although Mtb is a well-known disease in humans and domestic animal species, it remains poorly understood in elephants. Respiratory infections, primarily diagnosed for tuberculosis, are found in almost all captive elephants in cities due to high pollution levels. It is assumed that most infected animals are shedding mycobacterial organisms into the respiratory tract. Elephant respiratory systems are not geared for living in a high CO<sub>2</sub>-saturated atmosphere.

The outbreak of Ebola virus in 2014/15 in Sierra Leone, SARS in 2003, and Covid-19 in China in 2019, tuberculosis in Jaipur can now be added to the list, undiscovered since at least 2011/12 when I shot my documentary film *Where the Elephant Sleeps* in Hathigaon. Even then, we had already suspected existing cases of tuberculosis. The required clearance by the AWBI (NOC) and the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) for the film release seemed to have triggered the Animal Welfare Board of India to start an extended examination and take notice of the alarming situation of the elephants in Jaipur in December 2017.

I have been studying the behaviour of elephants in the wild and in captivity for the last ten years, and I am fighting for their rights alongside a community of elephant and wildlife lovers, renowned conservationists and elephant specialists in India. Therefore, for the second time, my organisation Elefanten in Not decided to conduct the second Foot Treatment Camp for 113 elephants in Jaipur, Elephant Village, in Jan 2020. To my delight, the Forest Department agreed and finalised the contract. However, months before the scheduled date approached, the Department kept silent and was non-cooperative to all the needed and agreed preparations to help alleviate foot problems and pain for these elephants.

In utter disregard for international condemnation and sheer callousness towards elephant and human health, the Department maintained its no-response policy until the start date. We were forced to cancel the already booked flight tickets of two veterinarians and two elephant behavioural consultants. However, we had little time to investigate the ten tuberculosis-positive infected elephants during the said time. But what we found was shocking. Out of ten MTB-infected elephants, we could identify nine elephants as per riding numbers displayed, walking up Amer Fort. This was noted in the investigation period between Jan 23 - 26, 2020. It can be supposed that they have been doing the same activity every day through all the previous years, with tourists on their backs. These are the riding numbers of the Mtb-infected elephants according to the Animal Welfare Board of India (AWBI) - findings from 2018: number 55, 64, 65, 71, 73, 76, 99, 110 and 113.

These elephants should have been put off work and quarantined immediately after being diagnosed to be Mtb positive for treatment and rest. Sadly, two years later, these elephants walk with tourists on their backs up to Amer Fort. Also, we found elephants with alarming foot

conditions and body problems, like uneven walking, limping, feet dragging, and swellings on feet which sooner or later caused enormous suffering, if not death to the animal.

Two of these Mtb elephants were spitting mucus, riding numbers 73 and 55, out of their trunks (instead of water, used to hydrate themselves when they are hot). It can be suggested that more elephants and their mahouts are infected with this contagious disease.

During the same period between Jan 23 and Jan 26, 2020, one elephant was seen at Amer Fort dragging its right hind leg. Three people were sitting atop this animal, two tourists in the heavy iron howdah basket and one mahout on her neck, to control. The animal named Bobbi (riding number 14) could not lift her right hind foot anymore, yet she was forced to carry tourists up to Amer Fort. The dragging noise of pulling her foot behind on the ground was like sandpaper touching the road with a few tons of body weight and humans sitting on top. The video can be requested by writing to me.

One blind elephant, riding number 115, named Pinki, could also be seen walking up Amer Fort with unilateral blindness. Seventeen elephants were found to be blinded on one side in 2018, and two elephants were completely blind. Blindness in elephants is not always naturally caused but may be inflicted by mahouts hitting the animal in the sensitive zone between the eye and ear to better control the animal. Blinded elephants are prohibited from giving rides and working at Amer Fort by Wild Life Protection Act, 1972. Work extracted from handicapped animals is cruelty, per the PCA (Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act), a central statutory act.

The body and foot conditions of almost all captive elephants in Jaipur and elsewhere in the country are alarming. Dehydrated and malnourished, with overgrown, deformed and cracked toenails, open swellings at the top of their feet and uneven and bruised foot pads with dry cuticles, lead to painful and crippling foot diseases, if not death of the elephant. Walking up and down the hill carrying heavy tourist loads on their backs is highly stressful to their back, spine and feet since overgrown toenails crack. Little rocks settle in cracked feet pads and easily travel up to the deeper levels of their feet, as bodyweight helps push inwards.

Elephants are toe-walkers. Elephants, cows, horses, and rhinos are all examples of "unguligrade" animals, which means they walk on their toes. They are also known as "digitigrade" animals because they stand and walk on their digits (toes) rather than resting their entire foot on the ground like humans or bears do. A gelatinous substance is between the sole and heel of this giant animal, like in modern running shoes. Their heels function like a buffer or shock absorber while walking but are more than just shock absorbers. This gelatinous substance or cushion contains cells that help transmit seismic signals from the ground, like from distant herds and send information to the animal's brain. It is easy to understand that standing on concrete floors in their stalls for hours will damage the animals' feet and their natural senses in a significant way. Also, they suffer in complete isolation from other elephants since their narrow stalls do not allow for even a second companion animal in the same stall.

Due to insufficient care, foot rot or pododermatitis is widespread in India for captive elephants. The elephants are kept on short chains in their stalls and stand in their faeces. The primary causes of foot problems are chronically wet and dirty conditions of their tethering spots. The causative organisms are a mixture of bacteria, fungi and yeasts. The acidity of urine and the

unhygienic conditions of the stalls, in general, cause massive infections easily. The hind limb with chronic non-healing sole ulceration of a female captive elephant in Tamil Nadu shows the herculean task of treating such avascular infections.

Captive elephants stand hours and days on concrete floors making them vulnerable to painful arthritis and bone infections, eventually leading to the animal's death. These poor elephants are deprived of any natural conditions they would generally find in the wild. They are deprived of their will and their individuality. Elephants in captivity, worshipped by millions of Indian people as the embodiment of Lord Ganesha, are misunderstood and neglected in their natural conditions. In captivity, they walk as broken shadows of their wild counterparts on hot tarred urban roads, often diseased and blind.

Elephants are sentient beings who live in family clans, nurturing their young, caring for their elderly and mourning their dead. Their intelligence and feelings are close to that of humans, including the ability for self-recognition. Unfortunately, they cannot speak for themselves. We must free these elephants which we enslave. They are not commodities to be bought or sold, used and abused into servitude and obedience by selfish, greedy, ignorant and criminally minded humans working in their own best commercial interests.

The Government of India bans sale and purchase. Nonetheless, illegal trade is rampantly flourishing. Ironically, it is believed that 90% of the Jaipur elephants in Rajasthan come from Assam illegally. They are issued transfer certificates valid for several months for participating in processions or similar events and then to be returned to their state of origin.

However, these elephants will never see their homeland again. How can they obtain ownership certificates issued by the Forest Department of Jaipur when the Transfer Certificates clearly say to be returned after the permitted several months to their home state? For that very reason, most custodians failed to produce a valid Ownership Certificate and a Transport Permit, allowing the elephant to be taken to the State of Rajasthan. Also, a legal document to prove the transfer of animal possession, ideally vetted by the Chief Wildlife Wardens of the relevant states, could not be produced (AWBI). These questionable ownership certificates do not continue to have any attached health checkup records, which is mandatory. In fact, 48 Ownership Certificates mention the present "market value" and the "source of purchase". To indicate commercial value is prohibited under the Central Government law and contradicts the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 provisions. How can a Forest Department issue such papers? Rajasthan, with its desert climate, is not an elephant range state. It is too hot and dry, and for the 110 elephants residing in this parched atmosphere, the living, feeding and watering conditions are far from optimal. They are dehydrated, with no water provisions provided in the city. Elephant owners may intentionally dehydrate their elephants to ensure they cannot splash their water reservoir from their bellies onto the tourists. They are often not given any water from the early morning hours until two or three o'clock in the afternoon, if not later.

Due to elephant owners' and mahouts' ignorance and neglect of their needs, they are forcefully stuffed with sugar cane and beaten to eat when sick. Their feed contains little or no green fodder. It is mostly comprised of sugar cane and some chapati. Do we think that this is natural food for them? Elephants in the wild eat up to 250-300 kg of food they find in grasses,

barks, branches, twigs, flowers or fruits from different trees in the wild while moving 20-30 km in one day.

Elephants suffer throughout their lives in the business and tourist industry, which exploits them till their death. The number of elephants dying in Jaipur in Elephant Village Hathigaon is alarming. After shooting *Where the Elephant Sleeps*, at least ten elephants died in the following 18 months of 2012-13. Five elephants died between June and October 2017. And more elephants are dying due to poor husbandry conditions and animal exploitation. It is not easy to get hold of the numbers since elephant owners dominate the Forest Department and do not allow any examination by independent welfare organisations that would provide science and medical care for the animals and valid, neutral documents for their health checkups.

Another unnatural behaviour is the stereotypical swaying of captive elephants, which indicates behavioural stress disorder. Restless, swaying from one leg to another and one side to the other, isolated from other elephants, chained elephants show these long-lasting effects very similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) humans suffer. They suffer silently due to human violence, a damaging environment, and jail-like enclosures or stalls without being able to move freely. (video on request is available from me)

For the Jaipur elephants' well-being, welfare guidelines, regular health examinations, and foot care must be followed. Testing for mycobacterial tuberculosis infection should be an integral part of the preventive medicine program of every elephant-holding facility. Government must be serious about the emerging Elephant Endotheliotropic Herpesvirus (EEHV) threat in captive elephants. Biannually, the government must permit independent veterinary specialists from India and abroad to conduct health tests and other procedures for treatment and diagnosis. The quality of life of humans and elephants depends on our attitude towards nature and its wildlife.

Animals that have to change is *Homo Sapiens*.