

Elephants waiting for freedom



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The death of elephant Lakshmi at the Manakula Vinayagar Temple in Puducherry has raised the question about rearing elephants at temples. While a section asks if the forest animals should be chained on the premises of temples, another says that after all, it is an age-old practice and asks why it should be scrapped now.

What do historical data say about the issue?

Selfish men

The hunter-gatherer culture that began killing animals for the humans' convenience had changed the lifestyle of animals, says Yuval Noah Harari in his book 'Sapiens: A Brief History of Mankind'. Then instead of going out for killing animals indiscriminately and eating their flesh, man started growing select animals and using them for their food, making them

reproduce a lot. Besides, man made the animals do their menial jobs. Goat, buffalo, horse and donkey were made to carry the burdens of cargo. Over the years, elephant also joined them.

Poaching of elephants started as man found their tusk and tail hair useful for several needs. Herds of elephants were killed. So, in order to curb the poaching, the British government in India brought in a law making it an offence in 1871.

Meanwhile, the practice of stationing and maintaining elephants at temples went on uninterrupted.

Elephants escape circuses

Back in 2017, the union government banned circus companies doing showbiz with animals. But before taking this action, the government had to face lots of hindrances.

In 1998, the government already banned the circuses employing lion, tiger, boar, monkey and leopard, but exempted the use of elephants.

Yet complaints of harassment of elephants poured in. So, surprise raids were conducted at the circuses to check whether the elephants were maintained as per the Recognition of Zoo Rules, 2009. But after discovering several violations of rules, the government set free elephants from the circuses.

But, on the other hand, temples and private individuals still have elephants. In 2019 it was known through an RTI response that in all, 2,675 elephants were maintained by people. Of them, 1,821 elephants were in the custody of private individuals. Elephants are used for forest patrolling and tourists' rides and also used as kumkees for capturing forest elephants.

In Tamil Nadu 124 elephants are maintained – 33 in temples and 26 in the custody of private individuals. Some Dargahs too, have elephants.

Contrary to Nature

Elephants are in the habit of walking for 20 to 40 km every day. But elephants under the maintenance of temples or private hands are denied this facility. Conservationists have pointed out that as the elephants are naturally inclined towards eating 70 types of plants in forests, the food fed to them at temples is not suitable for their digestive systems. The temple food is also a major factor for the elephants suffering from obesity and diabetes, they say.

Sangeetha of Kerala in 2016 made a documentary film titled 'Gods in Shackles' which portrayed how elephants are ill-treated at the temples in Kerala and also highlighted how the pachyderms are harassed and tortured during the Tiruchur Pooram festival.

The film has brought to light the fact that during several temple festivals in Kerala in the period of December-May, elephants are made to do various cumbersome works. In fact, that is the period when elephants are supposed to be mating.

During the temple processions, four people sit on the elephants decorated with ornaments and made to walk slowly amid deafening fireworks. The animals' pain and agony are not understood by men.

The social media is teeming with visuals of elephants in musth killing mahouts and several people. But the world does not know what kind of torture the elephants in captivity are subjected to. The practice of beating and torturing the animals is carried on as a ritual known as 'Katti Atikkai' in Kerala. Several elephants have died of this torture.

Legal loopholes

According to the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, under Schedule 1 lions and tigers are protected. Of course, elephants too have the same legal protection. But certain legal loopholes cause elephants untold hardships. According to an amendment made in 2002, if

one has got a certificate from the Chief Conservator of Forests, he/she can have elephants under his/her maintenance. There are complaints that exploiting this legal provision, several people have illegally brought elephants into their custody. Moreover, it is feared that a new amendment to be brought in will enable those possessing elephants to transfer the animals to others. The nature activists have also expressed concern that the amendment has provisions that will cause trafficking in elephants.

Of course, it is not possible to send all temple elephants back to the forests for the forest cover has already shrunk and human habitations have increased. The government cannot accommodate all elephants at rehabilitation camps. In fact, the cost of maintaining an elephant is around Rs. 1 lakh.

There are also complaints that organizations such as PETA imbued with the western thinking interfere in this issue without understanding the Indian cultural aspects, causing troubles to the elephants. That was manifest in the matter of Jallikattu (the famous Bull-taming sport widely practiced in Tamil Nadu). It was alleged that it was the confusion caused by PETA which marked the problems behind the death of the Puducherry Manakula Vinayagar Temple elephant. The allegation corroborated the complaints.

What's to be done

The only thing to be done for now is to ensure that the existing elephants are maintained properly. In countries such as Sri Lanka, Thailand etc., elephants are reared independently in the forests owned by the temples in such a way that they indulge in free reproductive activities.

Back in Tamil Nadu, there are forests owned by our temples. So, the elephants can be allowed to roam about the forests freely with proper security.

In the light of experiences gained from the Mudumalai elephants rehabilitation camps held in the past, such rehabilitation exercises can be improved. The society as a whole must have a change of attitude towards elephants and then say that elephants need not be reared at temples any longer.

Translated by V. Mariappan