

1 Kerala-The Best State for the Captive Elephant.

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The life of the captive elephant has been deeply intertwined with Kerala's culture, religion and society. The people and the elephant once shared a special bond. The elephant did indeed live a life of bliss. Food and water was in plenty, care and concern was in large measure and life for the elephant was indeed glorious. Today with the growing numbers, problems have been compounded and the life for the elephant has reached deplorable levels. Intellectuals like the noted poet Sugatha Kumari and the writer Paul Zacharias, many concerned citizens and citizen groups as evidenced from newspaper reports and editorials and letters of complaints indicate that the life of the captive elephant in Kerala is at an all time low. It is this that we wish to change. We need to make the life of the elephant in Kerala as glorious as experienced in the years long gone by. To do this successfully the various stakeholders must work together. The stakeholders include the following:

- Owners,
- Elephants handlers- mahouts and kavadies,
- Elephant users- Devasoms, Temple Committees, and other users,
- Elephant care givers- the veterinarians,
- The public spirited- individuals and organizations,
- Enforcement agencies.

The Fundamental duties of every citizen in enshrined in our Constitution. Article 51 A (g) clearly states that it is the duty of every citizen to show compassion to every living creature. Each time we commit an act of cruelty against the elephant we violate the Constitution and fail to perform our fundamental duty. The principle involved in training the elephant is to break its will. The methods are often brutal. A good question we need to ask ourselves is : Is this the way we show compassion?

The elephant cannot be truly domesticated like the cat and dog and always longs to return to the wild. In nature the elephants live in herds. The elephants are intelligent and have complex emotions much like man. When we keep it in isolation away from other members it suffers serious psychological scars. We must keep these facts in mind and take more than special measures to make its life glorious as it was in the years long gone by.

The Government on its part has come out with the various rules, regulation and law. It is important that all stakeholders do their part and adhere to these instructions.

Owners have a special responsibility. Just as a parent is responsible for the upbringing of their children the owners have a responsibility to see that the elephant is given the best care, treated the best and ensure that the elephant and the public are not put to any difficulty, guarding especially against any fatalities.

For the elephant the mahout and the kavadies take the place of the elephant's family. The elephant looks upon them as their closest companion and are look upon them as their care-givers. They therefore have to nurture and maintain a close bond with the elephant. The mahouts and kavadies must be patient and kind and attentive to every need of the elephant. They must be able to read the messages that the elephant communicates, understand the difficulties faced and take appropriate action to correct the situation, for they take on the role of the guardian of the elephant.

The elephant user plays an important role and it is he who decides the way the elephant will be treated. The elephant user must be aware about the physical, physiological and behavioral aspects of the elephant and utilize the elephants within the framework of this knowledge and within the framework of rules regulation and law.

The care-givers- the veterinarians play a very crucial role in ensuring the well being of the elephant and in guarding against fatalities. Being aware of the physical, physiological, psychological and behavioral aspects of the elephant they are responsible for the health and care given to the elephant. Aware of the behavioral changes associated with musth and the extreme risk that public are put to in case an elephant in musth is used in public they have a heavy responsibility. They must always err on the positive side- and make sure that an elephant with signs or indications of musth are never used in festivals. **Owners, elephants handlers, elephants users and veterinarians must ensure that before an elephant is used in public, the elephants is examined by a veterinarian and certified that it is free of symptoms of musth.**

The various agencies play a supporting role- ensuring that the rules, regulations and law are upheld and that both the elephant is well taken care of and the public are safe when the elephants is used in public places. The agencies are dependant on the owners, the elephants handlers and the elephant users to rise to the occasion and act responsibly. The agencies are ably assisted by public spirited individuals and organizations. The public spirited must act responsibly and not act as mere problem creators.

What does it take to make Kerala the State where the elephants are best treated?

1. The willingness of all stakeholders to treat the elephant according to its physical, physiological and behavioral nature.
2. The willingness to assume responsibility to perform ones fundamental duties and adhere to the law of the land.
3. To follow the rules and regulation without the need for enforcement.
4. To be willing to contribute for the welfare of the elephant.

The Kerala Forest department proposes the following strategy:

First help rediscover the sacred bond that once existed between man and the elephant, Second, create awareness, sensitize stakeholders and build consensus so that there is ownership and realization that there is a problem at hand and this needs to be corrected, Third, build commitment and willingness on part of all stakeholders to act positively, Fourth, identify the few delinquents (with the help of stakeholders) that are the source of the problem and undertake corrective action, and finally Fifth, strengthen enforcement.

The Kerala Forest Department on its part will spare no effort in extending every support on the one hand and strengthen enforcement on the other. The KFD seeks the active support of all stakeholders and hopes that this year will be an incident free festival year. To achieve this, the KFD with the active participation of all stakeholders will formulate an Action Plan to make this year incident free and to make the State of Kerala the best State for the care and concern of the captive elephant.

I am confident that Kerala and its people will indeed be the friend of the elephant for all time to come.