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STATUS OF TEMPLE ELEPHANT MANAGEMENT IN TAMIL NADU, SOUTHERN INDIA.

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INTRODUCTION

The Asian Elephant *(Elephas maximus)* an endangered species is declining in numbers due to habitat loss and poaching. Less than 50,000 elephants are believed to survive in the wild and an additional 15,000 in captivity, a total population size which is only 10% of the current estimate for the African elephant (Sukumar, 1986). Many who study and care for elephants believe that the future for elephant's survival rests with captive breeding programmes and it can be claimed to be a very useful and indispensible tool in conservation work. In India, zoos, circuses, working elephant camps (Forest Department) and temples are the four places where elephants are being kept in captivity but due to advances and changes in the recreation and entertainment field during the past decades the number of circus companies in India has gone down. Among the rest, zoo and working elephant camps are functioning as significant breeding centres which could reduce pressure on wild elephant population by meeting the requirements of demand through captive breeding. Since breeding is not at all an objective of elephant management in temples it does receive less attention and apparently no information is available regarding the management.

Keeping elephants in the temples has been a religous practice in India and elsewhere in Asia. In South India, 150 to 200 elephants are being kept in Hindu temples (Sukumar, 1989). Since a sizable population is preserved by these practices, knowledge about the current practices would be helpful to improve its condition through effective management with the help of zoo and working elephant camp management techniques. A survey showed that 36-40 elephants were found to be kept in temples of Tamil Nadu, Southern India. Since most of the elephants are kept without the permission from the Forest Department, getting the exact figure is difficult. As elephants have been treated in more or less the same way in all the temples, only a representative of 12 elephants was selected for this study (for details, see Gokula, 1994).

HISTORY

Most of the elephants were purchased either through Forest Department auction or from the circus by devotees and given to the temples (mostly at the age of 3 - 5 years old) as a donation. Only the temple authorities are taking all the responsibilities for elephants from the date of acquisition untill their death. One or two mahouts (mostly non tribes) are given the charge of handling the animal. Due to the problem in maintaining and controlling bull elephants, cows are mostly preferred by the temples.

ELEPHANT ENCLOSURE

No house or shelter was specially designed and built for elephants. Some of them are given a room without enough space and some are tethered to any available pillar in the temple or outside. Most of the shelters did not match with the standards stipulated by Government of India for elephants (8.0 x 6.0 x 5.5m, Central Zoo Authorities Act, 1992) and evidently the space is not enough for free movement of the animal. Further- more in majority of elephant shelters in temples, ventilation and the drainage systems are not up to standard. Spraying of disinfectants is not regularly done. Only a few have water troughs and electricity.

DIET AND FEEDING

Elepthant like any other animal needs a balanced diet and for captive elphant this can be achieved by including grain rations in its diet in addition to the green fodder (Krishnamurthy, 1992). He further stated that the grain ration should be in the cooked form as it improves the digestion and palatability and should contain cereals like rice, wheat, finger millet and maize to meet the elephant's energy demands as they are rich in carbohydrates. Protein rich legumes such as green gram, horse gram etc, are also needed to meet the protein needs and addition of salts and minerals to meet their mineral needs. In the temple, rice alone as cooked food and 4 types of plant species (sugarcane leaves, *Zea mays* leaves, Coconut leaves and *Cyanodon* grass) as natural food are given to elephants. An average of 10.3 ± 5.87 kg of cooked food and 54.7 ± 39.87 kg of natural food (total 64.1 ± 31.6 kg day) is given to elephants. Apart from this, some of them are getting various types of food (green vegetables) through begging practices (discussed seperately). Moreover there is no difference in the quantity of food given, as the age of the elephant increases. Krishnamurthy (1992) stated that on a dry matter basis, the grain ration requirement is about 0.5% of the body weight and the daily ration of elephants should be according to the age groups. Hence the food given to temple elephants is in no way near to meet the demands of a balanced diet of the elephants.

EXERCISE

Apart from enteraining the devotees coming to the temple by offering blessings and walking either for begging practices or to the water source for bathing, literally the temple elephants do no exercise. Most of the time they were literally tethered to their house or to a pillar in the temple the whole day. This factor may phychologically or physiologically affect the animal as it spends less amount of time for resting in the wild.

MEDICAL CARE

All the elephants are provided with local medicene (herbal medicine) which is prepared by the concerned mahouts in their traditional way. No temple had a permanent veterinary doctor for elephants. The temple elephants lack adequate bath and neem oil treatment because of poor water facilities and lack of knowledge about the neem oil treatment. No adequate care was given to this job. Majority of the elephants were infested with namatode and trematode parasites. Santiapillai and Jackson (1990) stated that the elephants in captivity are prone to number of disease and therefore their care and treatment are important aspects of their management. Dhungal *et. al.*, (1990) reported worms to be one of the common health problems in captive elephants. Lack of modern medical facilities and absence of veterinarians to attend the elephants coupled with the practice of herbal medicines by majority of the mahouts and non practice of de-worming had resulted in such a poor health condition of the temple elephants.

BEGGING PRACTICES

An endangered animal begging in each and every shop and house can be seen in most of the templ cities of Tamil Nadu. Though, keeping elephants has also been a traditional religious practice since prehistoric periods, they were not trained to beg but food was given voluntarily by people. The elephants have been trained recently to beg and give "begging call" as well as "thank you call". It occurs any time of a day. It might have started because of the mahouts' interest in getting money out of it. Even though this practice seems to be bad, the elephant receives energy rich and diverse food from the people.

CONCLUSION

In all aspects, the current elephant management in temples seems to be poor because of lack of knowledge on the elephant behaviour and keeping the elephant in temples seems to be merely to adorn the temple rather than playing a role in endangered species conservation. This practice can also be effectively improved by enhancing conditions for keeping and maintaining elephants, encouraging studies on domestic elephants, and increasing the people's awareness.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT :

1. *The current practices could be improved by encouraging research on various aspects of elephants in captivity.*

2. *Each temple or few temples (with elephants) should have a permanent veterinarian or the animals must be at least regularly taken to the local veterinary hospital.*

3. *The begging practice must be stopped.*

4. *Quality and quantity of food should be increased.*

5. *Massive funding from either government or private nature organizations for elephant care is needed.*

6. *All temple elephants should obtain the ownership certificate and licence from the Wildlife authorities. This would help in their ennumeration.*

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