

The Story of Asia's Elephants. Raman Sukumar. Marg Foundation, 148, Mahatma Gandhi Road, Mumbai 400 001. 2011. pp. 339. Price: Rs 3500, US\$ 82.

In Hindu and Buddhist traditions, the elephant is sacred. In Hindu faith elephant is humanized and as *Ganapati* (*Ganēśa*) and worshipped. Historians date the *Gānāpatyā* (the *Ganapati*-cult) to have diversified in the 5th century CE in India as an independent faith, which developed into a powerful movement, particularly in *Mahārāṣṭra* in the later years¹. However, Hindu religionists date *Ganapati*-worshipping practice to have evolved much earlier in the Vedic times, citing from *Taittiriya Samhita* and *Yajur Vēda*. Albino elephants, although rare, are held more sacred in Buddhism-practising Asian countries (e.g. Thailand, Myanmar) than in India. Recall the Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer film, on the albino-elephant calf *Maya*, directed by John Berry in 1966. Even in landscapes where elephants do not naturally exist, these animals have established a positive relationship with humans. For example, the Christian mythology considers elephant as an enemy of the serpent², and as one that represents chastity and benignity. Græco-Roman tradition considers the elephant as an attribute of Mercury and therefore, it symbolizes intelligence. According to Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE), elephants are the 'closest to man; not only they recognize the language of their homeland, obey orders, and remember what they learned, but also they worship the sun and stars, and purify [themselves] at the new moon, bathing in the river, and invoking the heavens'³. *Pālakāpyā* (estimated 1000–1300 CE) wrote *Gaja Sāstrā* (*Hastāyurvēdā*), which provided a comprehensive understanding of elephant's anatomy, illnesses and different treatment strategies.

I hail from Palghat and I have grown seeing (tamed) elephants. Their majestic size and disproportionately small, but graceful eyes have been awe-inspiring to me. The image of elephants decorated with gilt caparisons and colourful silk parasols standing gracefully for hours together – as though enchanted by the rhythmic resonance of the *pañcāvād-yaṃ* – in my village during festival time is memorable. Several wealthy families owned one or more elephants in Palghat. Watching these pachyderms standing – from a safe distance, of course – lazily

chewing coconut fronds and resting one of their legs on another is unforgettable. When I started teaching biology in a Madras-university college, my interest in mammals grew. Raman Sukumar (Sukumar, hereafter), during his occasional trips to Madras used to share with me his exciting escapades in the elephant sanctuaries of peninsular India. Three–four years ago, we managed to bring Sukumar to Orange (NSW) for a few weeks, since the academic staff at Orange were keen to know about his findings on wildlife–human conflicts in agroecosystems using the keystone species *Elephas maximus indicus*. During that trip, Sukumar and I had many opportunities to discuss elephants in southern-Indian history, culture and mythology. I remember discussing elephants in *Sangam* [*Tamizh*] literature (300 BCE–300 CE)⁴ with him. Elephant was *ānai* in *Sangam* times, whereas in contemporary Tamil Nadu it is *yānai*, while, interestingly, in Kérala the word *ānai* remains! Two more examples would substantiate my point. (i) The *Kurava* people of the *Sangam* period inhabiting the *Kuriñi* (mountainous) landscape, while performing the *vériyattu* (a dance performed at high excitement levels to songs rendered in the accompaniment of percussion instruments such as *tudi*, *parai*, *murasu*) refer to elephants in their songs sung in praise of their Lord (see *Pérumpānātru-p-padai*, verse 75 and *Paripādal*, verse 19.2). (ii) A c. 2nd century CE copper-plate inscription reference to a gift of 500 villages to *Paranar* by *Čera* King [*Kéralaputra*] *Čenkuttuvan* (vide *Patitru Pattu* 5)⁵ includes the term *ūmbar-k-kādu* (*ūmbar* – elephant, also *Ficus racemosa* tree; *kādu* – forest). In such an exciting background of elephant–human cultural relationships through ages, particularly in Asia and generally across the world, I was pleased to get a copy of Sukumar's book for review.

Information in this c. 339-page book is treated under the themes: (1) Asian elephant in prehistory and proto-history; (2) Elephants in Vedic and epic literature; (3) Elephant armies and the rise of empire; (4) Elephant goes West; (5) Elephant in the Buddhist and Jain world; (6) Elephant in Hindu culture; (7) Elephants in the Islamic period; (8) Elephant in colonial Asia; (9) Elephant in independent Asia and (10) Ecology and conservation of Asia's elephants, providing a panoramic, but comprehensive view of the evolving relationship between *Homo*

sapiens and *Elephas maximus* from the Harappan times (c. 3000 BCE) to the present day. Sukumar has dealt with a range of interesting points at an extraordinary level of accuracy, gathered from various books and museums, and journal articles on the history, culture, and anthropology of elephants, plus his personal observations and research articles on the ethology and ecology of elephants in India.

The chapter on elephants in *Vedic* and epic literature attracted me the most. This chapter is exhaustive, supported by appropriate illustrations from different periods. A brief reference to the *āsta-dik-gajās*, I thought, would be exciting. In Hindu belief of creation, when *Brahma*, the Creator, 'blew life' into *hiranyagarba* (the cosmic egg), the universe started to wobble unable to bear the power of *Brahma*'s blowing. The *Saptariśis* recited *Sāma* (*vēda*) *gāna*. That recitation resulted in eight super-powered elephants: the *Irāvātā*, *Pundarikā*, *Vāmanā*, *Kumudā*, *Ānčanā*, *Puśpadantin*, *Sārvabaumā* and *Supradikā*, which assumed the role of stabilizing the wobbling universe; they became the *āsta-dik-gajās* guarding the eight compass points (see *Vālmiki Rāmāyanā*, *Bāla Kānda*, *Sarga* 1–7). Returning to the chapter in Sukumar's book, a reference is made to the famous uttering of *Yudiśtra*, '*Aswatāmā hata: kunjara*' to *Drōnačarya* on the 15th day of the *Kurukśētra* battle, a partial lie by *Yudiśtra*. The intent here was to convey a message that *Drōnā*'s favourite son *Aswatāmā* was killed by *Bhima* and thus stun *Drōna*, so as to create a time slot for *Driśtadyumnā* to slit *Drōnā*'s throat, a plan hatched by *Krśnā*. The truth was that *Bhima* had killed only an elephant named *Aswatāmā*. Whenever a reference to elephants in *Krśna-dvaipāyāna Vyasā*'s *Mahābhāratā* occurs, the episode of *Bagadattā*, the king of *Pragjyotiśa* (later times, *Kāmarūpā*; the present day northeastern India), who fought in the *Kurukśētra* battle siding the *Kauravās* (see *Mahābhāratā*, *Bhishma Parvā*, Section LXIV) always comes to my mind. Wielding total mastery of management of elephants, *Bagadattā* could steer armies of elephants brilliantly. He rode *Supradika*, a majestic male, which had a pair of long tusks – similar to a pair of spears – that routed through *Pāndavā* army. According to *Vyasā*, the bonding between *Bagadattā* and *Supradika* was something more than what

would usually occur between a master and an animal. Reading *Vyasā's* description of the unprincipled killing of *Supradikā* by *Dananjayā* would bring tears to the eyes of any reader, however highly we are given to think of *Krśnā* and *Dananjayā*⁶. Sukumar, of course, mentions about *Supradikā* (p. 47), further to providing many insightful remarks on the weaponry and battle strategies resorted to at *Kurukṣetra*, particularly focusing on the warfare involving elephant armies.

The chapter 'Elephant in Colonial Asia' interested me next. It starts with a reference to the arrival of Vasco da Gama in Goa in the mid-15th century. Worthy of note is that chained elephants were used as a metaphor in newspaper cartoons to represent the enslaved India in the early 20th century. Most of this chapter alludes to elephant-trapping operations for timber movement in the then rapidly growing forest industry of the subcontinent, including *kheddah* operations in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). Reproduction of rare, spectacular oil paintings (e.g. figure 8.1, c. 16th century) and those of paper engravings (e.g. figure 8.2, Jan Collaert II print, c. 16th century) amply supports this chapter. The images from various international museums are impressive. Justifying the title of the chapter, Sukumar has made profound effort to collate details on the cultural history of elephants from Asian nations, beyond the subcontinent, which were, incidentally, also European colonies. The book also deals with the exploitation of elephants and their annihilation by the colonial rulers and their Indian royal friends, in the name of sport (pp. 231–235). Black-and-white photographs of such sport events in Ceylon in the 1890s are heart-wrenching (e.g. figure 8.14, p. 233). However, not all was dark and bleak. Elephants were sent as gifts to other nations as messengers of peace and love from India: for example, the Government of Madras led by Paramasiva Subbaroyan gifted a female elephant *Nellikuthra* (popularly, *Nellie*) to the people of New Zealand in 1927 (Figure 1). *Nellie* was the first Asian elephant in Australasia. The Wellington Zoological Garden information window indicates

that *Nellikuthra*, along with three other female Asian elephants, *Mahārāni*, *Nirvāna* and *Kamalā*, entertained New Zealanders for long. On another note, a medical doctor attached to the Madras Medical Establishment, William Gilchrist (1807–1895), besides being a surgeon by training and practice, seems to have been an enthusiastic veterinarian as well. Gilchrist documented treatment methods for several diseases of elephant, which remain as unpublished private papers in London (India Office; Record for shelfmark MSS Eur K503, William Gilchrist, <http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/india-office/select/>). I could recall that the English East-India Company issued a half-anna copper coin (today's worth 3 paise) with the image of the elephant-headed Hindu deity *Ganapati* on the obverse in 1839; I also remembered seeing 1930-dated currency notes issued by the Bank of Indonesia of value Rupiah 20,000 with images of *Ganapati* in a Jakarta museum a few years ago.

I could analyse every chapter, but my analysis would exceed the word limit stipulated for the review. In short, every chapter is illuminative with fascinating details presented crisply. The final chapter on the ecology and conservation of Asia's elephants is the jewel in the crown; because many papers have since



Figure 1. *Nellikuthra* at Wellington Zoo entertaining New-Zealand children, photo by John Pascoe (1943). Source: National Library of New Zealand (<http://www.natlib.govt.nz/collections/>) *Nellikuthra* died of intestinal ulcers in Wellington (NZ) on 15 August 1944.

been published by Sukumar in this context, I am refraining from making any remarks. By choosing a difficult-to-homogenize theme of linking art with science, Sukumar has elegantly demonstrated through *The Story of Asia's Elephants*, how a scientist can be an artist as well.

I enjoyed reading this book. It is an easy-to-read book, the material for which has flowed from the deft hands of an extraordinary wildlife scientist of India. I feel compelled to congratulate Marg Foundation, the publishers, for taking care of every minute detail in executing a near-perfect book; brilliant execution of graphics makes a deep impression. A must book for ecologists, wildlife enthusiasts, anthropologists, cultural historians and amateur biologists. Given the quality of work turned out, the price is not prohibitive, but I will earnestly hope that Marg Foundation will consider bringing out a cheaper edition (a paperback, an on-line version?) for undergraduate and high-school students to experience the sparkle of this delightful book on an amiable animal of India.

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