

Gajatames' Welfare and Conflict Parody: A Compromise?

It is believed that there are around 15,000 Asian Elephants living in captivity, arguably close to the number of free-ranging elephants that are distributed in southern India, encompassing the states of Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Captivity has been a subject of debate and despair for numerous welfare groups and cultural institutions who argue that elephants do not belong in captivity. Elephants kept on private properties, temples and tourist spots have lost touch with the semi-natural conditions that they enjoy in elephant camps or care centers. The



indigenous mahouts also suffer as a result of loss of employment.

Very often, the welfare of elephants is put on the backburner due to a sheer lack of fundamental knowledge, anthropocentric biases and poor insight into the science of wild elephants.

The Bannerghatta National Park, nestled close just 27 km from Bangalore, is a hotbed for human-elephant conflict. The settlements that abut the reserve often face destruction at the hands of elephants. Scientific studies have shown that in this landscape, lone bulls indulge in crop raiding more when compared to other elephants of other ages. This helps explain why elephants in Bannerghatta use the forest as a day-time refuge, only to raid crops at night. The reasons for crop raiding— like

loss of habitat, fragmentation of inviolate spaces and anthropogenic pressures — have had a detrimental impact on elephant distribution and survival.

Figure 1: A captive elephant adult male 'Vanaraja' in musth seen grazing at the Bannerghatta National Park.

The Bannerghatta Biological Park is tasked with the welfare and management of 14 captive elephants that are allowed to interact and roam in the wild. The elephants follow a systematic regime of upkeep and maintenance protocols that the mahouts and cawadis follow strictly. In this kind of a setup, wild males are often troublesome. The Gajatame, which Buddhists regard as a supreme animal, has faced severe onslaught right from medieval times. One could argue that timely attention with respect to food, water and shelter could fulfill the biological needs of an elephant, but there is no substantial evidence to support this. We attempted to find answers to issues which can be solved by relatively inexperienced, but highly motivated, young researchers, using simple methods and short observations of captive elephants in semi-natural conditions of the Bannerghatta National Park.



Figure 2: A wild adult male elephant 'Sidda' interacting with 3 captive females (AF, SAF and JF) that are chained.

The researchers were witness to a two-hour long interaction of an adult male elephant with a female adult, a sub-adult female and a juvenile female elephant. Considering that bulls do not select their group partners randomly, and musth wasn't a driver to this interaction either, it appeared that the bull was largely

disinterested in the group, as the female elephants presented themselves to the wandering male. The juvenile female looked interested in the male, who seemed to reciprocate. Normally, an adult female in oestrus aggressively rejects the bull's mounting attempts, but this encounter was free of any such aggression. Bulls are assumable to take the 'high risk, high reward' route, but in this ambiguous setup, the male elephant, despite spending so much time with the



females, didn't show any inclination to mate. One explanation for this could be that the defecation and urination by one sub-adult female might have confirmed to the bull that she was not in oestrus. Despite having said this, what is puzzling is the raised organ response of the bull towards the juvenile female. No other increased frequencies of sexual, antagonistic and marking behaviour were observed in the male elephant.

Figure 3: The wild male inspecting the female during urination and defecation.

When captive elephants are released into the wild, females tend to serve as conflict hotspots by attracting the lone bulls in the vicinity. The bulls use this as a refuge and a prologue to raid crops lands in the vicinity. This interaction would lead to the assumption that the male elephant, over a period of time, would use the captive female temporarily to raid nearby crop lands — such behaviour is extremely unnatural. The assumption could be that majority of bulls in Bannerghatta do not rely on



Figure 4: The wild male nudging a captive sub adult female.

captive females for reproduction completely, but use them as covers to shield themselves. Some males show signs of obesity, which clearly indicates that they are avid crop raiders, who are more oriented to secondary forest tracks. Based on this observation, it is safe to assume that captive elephants have a tendency to influence the crop raiding mechanisms of free-ranging elephants.

Figure 5: A captive juvenile female inspecting the raised male organ of the wild bull.



Captive elephants effectively use only a small patch of forest land to forage, which is most probably a result of their restricted movement (they are generally chained or hobbled). But this could also be the influence of lone bulls nudging their movements. So, one would expect elephant in semi-natural



Figure 6: A captive juvenile female presenting herself to the wild male.

conditions to not get enough exercise as expected, resulting in poor health. But in reality, things are quite different. Captive animals have enough time to forage and interact, which serves as a source of natural enrichment and wellbeing. Therefore, it becomes important to learn the influences of captive elephants and wild elephants in a close-knit ecological setup, which will go a long way in the understanding and conservation of Asian Elephants.

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