



The Fascinating Elephants

M. Kamal Naidu*

414, 6th Floor, Alladin Mansion, Begumpet, Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh (500 016), India

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Abstract

The article presents some interesting facts about the behavior and life of the elephants as experienced by the author. It is all about the glory and misery of wild elephants as members of their herd. Over thirty years of his work in several zoos and sanctuaries in India and Kenya the author shares his observations and experiences on the elephants including *mahwat* (elephant rider) ranging from elephants' affection, intuition, fear, desire and struggle to lord the herd, to miserable death at the end of life.

Correspondence to

*E-mail: mkamalnaidu@hotmail.com

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I had the opportunity to know the elephants and their ways in zoos and several sanctuaries in India, and also in Kenya spanning over thirty years. The observations, and experiences shared including the *mahwat* (elephant rider), are pieced together to give a picture of the life story, which is just fascinating.

At Delhi Zoo the elephant enclosure was the first one to encounter while walking into the zoo from my residence. I used to pass by the enclosure around eight in the morning, their feeding time. It made it a practice to give the first ball of jaggery mixed with rice and pulses, with mineral mixture almost everyday. In due course the elephants looked out for my daily visit, followed by making a fuss, rather fondling me with their trunk.

One cold winter night, owing to a sudden drop in temperature, an adult female broken her fastenings, the flimsy gate, and came into my garden. She was making herself merry with the fresh juicy banana plants. My little terrier was not happy with this intrusion into his possessive territory. He barked and barked with no chance of driving it away. It was the mighty and the midget. In the early hours of morning with brightness creeping in, I went out to investigate the annoyance to Blackie, my terrier. It was densely foggy; visibility was very poor.

I approached towards Blackie, dancing around the object of his annoyance feeling more confident with my presence, just as I approached toward the center of attraction, I felt a something soft stretched out towards the muffler around my head, and trying to pull it away. It dawned on me that it was an elephant, who knew me, probing at me to take away the nuisance of Blackie. I summoned the *mahwat*, and he took back the old lady to her enclosure. The day after the episode, an article appeared on the front page of Times of India "Zoo Dame Seeks the Boss's Warmth" by Aditi Chedda. This I presumed rightly explained the situation.

Another astonishing and very interesting incident happened at Kaziranga. My wife and I were traveling on elephant's back for early morning sightings in the sanctuary. We were wading through the high grass. At one point we stopped, and were enjoying the

swamp deer, where I used my cell-phone, and put it back into my pocket. We tried to move forward. The elephant would not move; instead made a shrill noise of indication to the *mahwat*. The *mahwat* seemed to have understood her, and asked us if we dropped something. We told him that we had nothing to drop. However, the elephant stepped back, and picked up my cell-phone from the grass, and handed it over to the *mahwat*. I was surprised to realize my cell-phone had slipped out of my pocket without my knowledge. The watchful elephant noticed it, or maybe intuition-ally realized it, and picked it up from amidst the tall grass. Is this not really fascinating?

The Lone Tusker

Sitting on a high *machan* (temporary shelter made of wood and bamboo) in Madumalai Sanctuary in Tamilnadu, on Ooty to Mysore road, contiguous to the famed Bandipore Sanctuary in Karnataka, the eerie silence of the jungle broke abruptly. There were loud crackling sounds, branches being swayed, tossed and shaken, with snapping and breaking of twigs under heavy footsteps. I stopped and listened. It was an old tusker, the cause of the commotion, ripping down branches while on his way to the pool in the river. I could not catch even the barest glimpse of him, and could not make out any details in the jumbled growth, and the confused shadows.

I sat down at a vantage point overlooking the pool, away from his path. The sounds grew louder as he neared the pool. The old tusker arrived at the pool. It had been visiting by many species of animals and birds since the morning. The old tusker seemed to love the pool with its cool, deep and wide waters. It gave him ample depth and width to submerge, and to bathe thoroughly. It seems he frequently visited the place in summer.

He visited the pool from his childhood for well over sixty-five years. He was recently banished from his herd by a robust young bull. He was a compound of arrogance, vanity and petulance in respect to the young male. He now felt thwarted and desolate,



and subject to long periods of melancholy. His erratic behavior increased due to frustrations. As a result of the initial shock of banishment, he became a gaunt and skeletal figure. With age, his skin hung loose at his knees and the neck; and the pads of his feet were worn down. His large ivory tusk, a remnant of his former glory, had blackened at the base. One of the tusks was broken, and the last molar got chipped, and half worn due to constant use in breaking, tearing and chewing hard trunks, branches, twigs and bark. His joints seem to ache as I understood, and so he walked with a stiff limping gait.

He got into the water with a loud swishing noise, sending waves all around, swaying and submerging the tender vegetation besides the pool violently. Immediately, his youth returned back momentarily. He drank and gurgled the water; he gamboled, splashed and sprayed it all over, and on himself. He twisted and rolled in the water, sending mighty waves not experienced in usual course. He remained submerged for long moments, and investigated its depths with innocent curiosity of a youth. He remembered his visits, and how he enjoyed in the company of his herd. He was pleased with himself.

He spent almost an hour in the water before he climbed out of it, with his feet plopping on the water surface. He was tall and gaunt, and shining wet in the sun. He stood on the sand bank at the edge of the pool, and sprinkled the soft grainy sand all over himself, to protect against the insects bothering him. He swung his ears back and forth in a leisurely rhythm, and rumbled contentedly. He vowed vengeance at that moment to get back to his herd, and drive away the young robust male.

When done with at the pool, he pushed his way into the thick undergrowth, and was swallowed up by it, despite his huge bulk. He went some distance and began feeding selectively on tender leaves and fruit, which were in abundance around the water. He felt contented and at peace; and made low rumblings in his throat. His food got limited to softer and readily masticated grasses, and shoots and leaves. He could not get enough of this quality, as they were very scarce, especially in summer. Therefore, he got weaker everyday. His digestive capacity weakened, and his dung contained pieces of undigested twigs and whole leaves. He flapped his torn and tattered large ears lazily while feeding, whose thick veins were twisted and knotted with age. Tears oozed down his wrinkled cheek, giving him a look of great wisdom and infinite sorrow.

As he moved slowly while feeding, his sensitive trunk picked up the scent of the tigers. He became a little perturbed. With age his confidence sagged, and this was further diminished since his abduction from the herd.

The exiled tusker fortuitously bumped into a tigress, and her cubs. He stood firm, and threatened her to move out of his terrain. He could not forget; he had lorded a herd. He had become megalomaniac over the years, and still believed he was the lord of the jungle. He flapped his ears vigorously, raised his trunk, and tossed his head with a loud threatening trumpet. The sound went echoing down the valley. He stamped his feet on the ground with annoyance, and tore down the creepers and vines and branches around, to show his annoyance.

As the distance between the tigress and the old tusker gradually narrowed, the tusker's confidence began to diminish, and he wavered. His loud trumpeting got reduced in volume. It slowly became a low whimper. The fear showed a sense of melancholy in him, such as he had only seldom experienced in his life. The

tigress with cubs became very vicious, and was ready to attack if he did not yield.

The tusker unknowingly, unwantedly turned around, and disappeared into the thick dense jungles, silently and speedily, with his short tail no longer taut; it was held loosely between his hind legs. I could hardly believe that such a large massive creatures could melt away so rapidly, and so silently into the jungle right before my eyes.

Elephants Fight it Out

One day around late afternoon at Palamau in Jharkhand, loud noises of crashing bamboo were heard. An elephant herd was feeding on the leaves, twigs, small branches and barks of selective trees. I could hear the babies squeal, while the cavernous stomachs of the adults produced loud gaseous rumblings.

Just then loud crashing noises were heard. The forest resounded and echoed to the wild and angry screams. A large male tusker charged swiftly head long through the bush, like an avalanche of gray rock. He dashed through the forest, splitting and crushing the smaller trees that stood in his way. He came suddenly, crashing and crackling the undergrowth, with a wild enraged trumpeting. The lone old tusker announced his presence to the herd. He came into the midst of the herd where the youthful female was present. Her most welcoming aroma in estrus attracted him.

Though he was old and weak, but at such moments felt highly rejuvenated. The scent of estrus awakened in him a fleeting nostalgia, and sent him dizzy. The arrogant maleness in him was aroused. The old tusker had vowed to regain the herd while he bathed at the pool in summer. His lonely existence after his banishment had hardened him. He fed on over a ton of the choicest leaves, fruits, long strips of bark, and roots all through the monsoon season, without the need for sharing, care or fear. He became robust, strong and vigorous.

The old tusker saw the young male wooing the robust young female, who was in her prime. She was plump after the good grazing and browsing during the rainy season. She was a personification of beauty in his eyes. Her tusks were thin and white, straight and sharp. Her ears were complete, soft and tender, not torn or tattered by the vegetation.

Seeing her, the old tusker could not stand the barrier of banishment. In such matters, age did not matter. He believed he could satisfy her. He was determined to have her. He remembered having every estrus female in the herd until he was banished. Why not have her now, and maybe for the last time. It would be his dreams come true.

The young robust male was enraged at the audacity of the old male barging in so unceremoniously. He was just forty years old. There was no dearth of food for him and the herd in this extensive well-watered valley. He was very well fed and robust, befitting to sire the herd's future progeny. He was huge, with perfect, symmetrical long pointed tusks. He knew his capacity, and his strength. He had full confidence in his ability, and so gave the old male a fierce warning to get away. The old tusker did not forget the glorious days before he was vanquished. He did not heed the challenge posed by the young male. The two giants were both mavericks in their own way. They considered a loss in the fight would be an ignominious defeat; but a victory had all the charms for the better. They would have the female, the herd, and the security.

The young male left his charming young female, and charged at



the old tusker crashing and tearing through trees, shrubs, bushes, bamboo clumps and lianas. The older tusker stood firm to meet the challenge.

They got entangled in a battle. They tore down branches that came in their way, charged at each other with great ferocity. They curled their trunks inwards, spread out their ears, and held their tails taut. They jabbed at one another to inflict the maximum damage, so as to cause the other to flee or to succumb. They were both determined, one not to lose, and the other to regain what he lost; both knew the charm and the glory of being the lord of a herd.

While the fight progressed between the two defiant giants for the robust young female, the other females in Corbett National Park in Uttar Pradesh gathered the young and moved to a safer area. They even lifted some young bodily, fearing they may get injured. The herd was a close-knit group, and had mutual reliance. A male bull had only a loose link with the herd. They generally found young ones too noisy and annoying, therefore preferred to keep away from the herd.

The young played boisterously at mock combats with ears flapping, and threatening with pig-like squeals. These games strengthened them, and helped them to carve a place for themselves in the hierarchy of the herd. Some very young were suckling their mothers. They were all unconcerned about the results of the raging battle. The herd continued feeding, cracking, crashing and breaking branches, and keeping the calves in their midst.

The fight went on through the day and far into the night. It was surprising to see the stamina of the old male. It was a case of sheer determination that he continued so long. The sturdy young male could not afford to lose his hold on the herd and the charming female. He fought with great vindictiveness and determination to subjugate his foe once and for all, such that he would never again come and challenge him.

The old tusker fought on. He began to get exhausted. He began to gasp. His age started showing up. The contest took curious turns. For the younger male despondency paved the way to ecstasy when he got some awesome jabs into the old male's chest, his thigh, and on his trunk.

The old master realized he was fighting a losing battle, and it was becoming the moment of reckoning. He realized the evil in his brain was once more bending, and reshaping reality. His dream came crashing. He gave up the fight. He turned around disappointed, and went away limping hurriedly like a fugitive, who had come to conquer and take back the estrus female, and the herd.

The sturdy youngster regained his breath, and beamed once more with confidence and pride. He went back to where he left his favorite female. She had stood between the fighting males and the herd, watching the battle. She watched for the outcome.

The herd welcomed the young male back into the herd as their rightful lord. They entwined their trunks with his and pushed their foreheads together in greeting.

He went over to the robust young female, who greeted him with joy. He was young, handsome and masculine. They both stood with their heads together and gently rumbled sweet nothings at each other, their trunks entangled with great affection and admiration. They disentangled their trunks, and began to caress each other lightly with the tips of their trunks. The trunks gradually moved down the length of their bodies, until they stood with their heads to the others tail.

The young male brought down his trunk in between her hind legs.

The female began to sway from side to side in great satisfaction. She rocked her whole body with extreme pleasure on being manipulated by him. When they were both fully aroused, he nudged her gently to comply. Her whole body shuddered and convulsed, and both creatures trumpeted together in bliss. Thereafter he moved away from her and the herd, being fully satiated.

In the meanwhile as the royal battle progressed, a female in the herd was to deliver her baby in Kaziranga National park in Assam. She moved away from the herd followed by an adult female. She cleared an area, the woods to deliver her baby.

When the time came, she spread her hind legs, and squatted slightly over the clearing, and squealed. Spasms racked her huge body. The old companion caressed her with its trunk, and rumbled sympathy. She forced out the calf's head, and with a violent effort expelled the purple-pink fetal sac to the cleared ground.

The calf fell rupturing the umbilical cord, and began to struggle, still entrapped in the mucus-coated membrane, which was gently stripped away by the older companion, gently with the sensitive tip of her trunk. The mother, gently and lovingly lifted the baby up with her trunk, and placed it between her fore legs, to enable it to suckle, while purring rumbles of contentment.

The calf still wet, rolled up its little trunk, and instinctively reached the twin breasts of its mother. While it tasted the rich, creamy milk, its mother picked up the fetal sac, and stuffed it into her mouth; and swallowed it.

The trio remained secluded from the herd for about a fortnight, while the calf mastered the use of its legs, and its eyes got adjusted to the light, before joining the herd. All the members of the herd showed a great interest in the new member to the family.

The old tusker was badly lacerated and bled profusely in Kahna National Park. The young tusker had pierced him in several places including in his lungs. Blood oozed out in spurts, it frothed and clotted. He got exhausted and suffocated. He could not eat, and writhed in agony. He starved for almost a fortnight. The outlines of his bones could be seen through the folds, and wrinkles of his skin. He became a skeleton. He could not walk. His struggles became weaker, and his calls feeble. He further weakened. His wounds suppurated, and got infested with maggots, and emitted a putrid smell. He could do nothing about anything. It was beyond his failing strength.

With great difficulty he struggled down to the stream, a little below his favorite pool. He could not make it to the large pool he loved. He wobbled, and his legs collapsed, and folded under him. He dropped on his chest heavily with a great impact, and lay in the stream helplessly. He could not get up; he was too weak.

There was a look of sorrow in his eyes, which was contagious. His passage from life to death was fleeting. He tried to take water, but could not. His trunk was too sore. His wounds further festered. He panted and gasped for breath. His head dropped low and limp. His eyes lost their sparkle. They were pathetic. They glittered no more. He was engulfed in a black wave, which weighed down his soul, and transformed his ardent passions into a devastating sadness and mourning, for this life was about to end. He never recovered. He began to fade, and darkness was closing in upon him, and he was sinking into an abyss. Darkness swallowed him, and he saw and heard nothing more. He never rose up again. He quietly passed away. He gave no outward signs of passing from life to death, other than the stopping of his heavy breathing. He became one with eternity, an integral part of the immense forest forever.