

## [Elephant's Price](#)

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### ANIMAL RIGHTS

## Elephant's Price

Neglect and brutal treatment too often beset our temple mascots

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Visitors to the famed Krishna temple at Guruvayoor in Kerala seldom skip visiting the nearby Punnathur Kotta Anathavalam, or elephant grounds. It is such a stunning experience to see the 57 elephants, ages from six to sixty-five, up close. There is a saying in India that one never tires of watching three things: the Moon, the ocean and an elephant. But all is not well in the lives of these intelligent, sensitive and highly social creatures.

There is another saying in India, "elephant's price," meaning "immensely expensive." It's a tribute to the value of an elephant in the old days when they served as crane, forklift, tow truck or Sherman Tank, as the occasion required. Even the temple elephants were kept busy with work in addition to being available for the religious functions. Their keepers, the mahouts, were then highly trained and respected. Today many are not. The result is the elephants now pay the high price of human neglect.

Take the example of the mahout Gopalakrishnan, an alcoholic. He had stupidly taken the majestic tusker Ravipuram Govindan out on the main thoroughfare of Kochi on January 22, 2003, despite the elephant showing signs of musth, the frenzied yearly sexual season of the males. The enraged elephant killed his mahout and terrorized the city before being shot by a tranquilizer gun.

Recently the government animal welfare officer took in an elephant, Lakshmanan, at nearby Mattanchery. He had burns on his forehead and mouth and was in very poor condition, all a result of mistreatment. There are many other examples.

There have been an increasing number of incidents of rebellious elephants, often those owned by temples. The mahouts are getting the blame because of their ruthless behavior toward the elephants, their lack of understanding of the psychology of the animal coupled with inexperience and dereliction of duty. The mahouts, according to officials of the temple administration I interviewed, are paid <sup>us</sup>\$125 a month, plus benefits, including housing— not a lot for a 24/7 commitment to an animal who may be daily contemplating your demise.

Temple elephants come from two sources. One is when a rich person gifts an elephant to a temple, a traditional offering. The pomp

and circumstance with which these gifts are received is not followed by proper care.

A second group of elephants are those hired out by their owners for work in the timber depots or to the temples for festivals.

According to Dr. K. C. Panicker, a Kerala Agricultural University veterinary college professor and currently the Secretary of the Elephant Welfare Association, Trissur, they, too, are not cared for properly.

Many have been subjected to cruel treatment to break their spirit and make them obey the commands. Some mahouts go to the extent of applying "the brakes" around their back legs to control them. This abominable instrument [photo upper right] drives spikes into the animal's leg if he offers any resistance against it. For an account of more humane training, see

[www.chiangmai-chiangrai.com/elep-atwork.h](http://www.chiangmai-chiangrai.com/elep-atwork.h)

[tm.](#)

"Many think that since it is just an animal, whatever they provide is enough," says Dr. Panicker. "But that is not the case with elephants. They are intelligent, emotional and sensitive. Elephants like clean premises. If the surface is filthy, they will sleep standing. Elephants drink only clean water. They become friendly with those who offer them their favorite food, such as plantain, jaggery, etc."

Panicker went on to explain the requirements of elephant care. "The quantum of food required by an elephant daily is five percent of its weight, which runs 2,500 to 4,500 kg. Throughout the day, except for the four hours when they sleep, elephants eat. A working adult should be fed five kilos of rice, ten kilos of ragi (black millet), 100 grams of salt, 50 grams of jaggery and 300 kilos of palm

leaves. Most private owners provide 18 kilos of cooked rice and 200 to 300 kilos of palm leaves. But now the shortage of palm leaves is a major problem and no efforts are being made to plant more."

With the palm consumption going up as the number of captive elephants increases, most of the elephants remain underfed, Panicker pointed out. Given this situation, the best alternative left is to grow hybrid napier grass in the wastelands. Similarly, provision for drinking water has to be made. Elephants consume around 250 liters of clean water daily. For good health, the elephant should spend three to four hours each day in water and be bathed with hard scrubbers. But these conditions are rarely met for the working elephant or those used at temple festivals.

On top of malnourishment comes increasing mistreatment by untrained mahouts, said

Panicker. The novices treat the animals ruthlessly and inflict injuries on them, creating an uncontrollable beast. Such continuous torture often leads to sickness and even death.

To a great extent, the nonavailability of trained mahouts could be attributed to the poor wages and to the risk involved, he said. Lack of proper care and maintenance also results in increase of deaths. During the past two decades, 234 elephants died in Kerala alone. The highest number was 20 in 1997.

The largest number of elephants kept in captivity is at Punnathur Kotta of the Guruvayur Temple administration. The area in which they are housed is quite inadequate, Panicker said, even though this is one of the better compounds in the

state. There is little provision for dealing with male elephants during the annual musth period when they become wild and don't respond to their mahout. This lasts for a few days in adolescent males up to three months in 30- and 40-year-olds. During this period, they are heavily chained and left without proper care.

Panicker makes recommendations to alleviate the problems. The Punnathur Kotta and like places should have more space, compound walls and a forest atmosphere so that the elephants can move freely. There has to be a mating yard to preserve the social order. There should be a special place for baby elephants to be raised, like the elephant orphanage set up in Kandy, Sri Lanka, see [members.lycos.co.uk/withanage/orphanage.htm](http://members.lycos.co.uk/withanage/orphanage.htm).

Instead of donating an elephant to the temple, Panicker recommends the devotee take up the maintenance of an elephant already owned by the temple. Ensuring the sensitive and emotional pachyderm's happiness and well being surely would be pleasing to the temple Deity, he noted.

Panicker helped organize the international workshop on elephant management held from October 25 to 27, 2002, at Trissur in Kerala under the auspices of the Elephant Welfare Association. Veterinarians from various parts of the country and others from abroad participated.

One of the best sources of information for modern veterinarians remains the Hasti

Ayurveda of Palapapia. This ancient text is the world's first on veterinary medicine and deals mostly with elephants and horses. Both were key to the military readiness of the kingdom. Ancient India understood elephants, and the level of care can be ascertained by comparing the food rations mentioned earlier in this article with the more nourishing and satisfying diet listed in the Arthashastra (at right) 2,300 years ago. In the USA, that diet could run <sup>us</sup>\$700/week. Unfortunately, these ancient texts are not consulted much today.

There are estimated in all of Asia to be 35,000 to 50,000 Asian elephants in the wild and an additional 15,000 in captivity. Their numbers are just a tenth of the

African elephant. The World Conservation Union Red List, which is a comprehensive data base of endangered species, states that Asian elephants have experienced a 50% reduction in numbers over the last three generations as a result of exploitation and decline of habitat.

No matter how well treated, an elephant remains an undomesticated animal. It has never been selectively bred like the cow and horse to live closely with humans. Consequently, only under the kindest and most intelligent of care will the animal be content in captivity. Unfortunately, our

traditional knowledge of how to provide such considerate care is declining as rapidly as the elephant's population.

## Elephants' Kingly Care

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The ancient Arthashastra treated them right

Kautiliya lived 2,300 years ago. He was the chief minister to the Maurya King, Chandragupta. He wrote the Arthashastra, an erudite text, running to 500 pages in translation, covering every aspect of government, including the care of elephants.

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"The King's

Superintendent of Elephants shall take proper steps to protect elephant forests and supervise the operations with regard to the standing or lying in stables of elephants, male, female or young, when they are tired after training, and examine the proportional quantity of rations and grass, the extent of training given

to them, their accouterments and ornaments, as well as the work of elephant doctors, of trainers of elephants in warlike feats, and of grooms, such as drivers, binders and others."  
(Introduction, Chapter 31, "The Superintendent of Elephants")

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"The first and seventh of the eight divisions of the day are the two bathing times of elephants; the time subsequent to those two periods is for their food; forenoon is the time for their exercise; afternoon is the time for drink; two (out of eight) parts of the

night are the time for sleep; one-third of the night is spent in taking wakeful rest." (Section 136)

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The [daily] rations for an elephant [of standard height]

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shall be one drona of rice [equivalent to 13.2 kg], half an adhaka of oil [1.6 kg], 3 prasthas of ghee [2.5 kg], 10 palas of salt [.5 kg], 50 palals of flesh [2.3 kg], one adhaka of broth (rasam) [3.3 kg], or twice the

quantity of curd [6.6 kg]; in order to render the dish tasteful, 10 palas of sugar (kshara) [.5 kg], one adhakara of liquor [3.3 kg], or twice the quantity of milk (payah) [6.6 kg]; one prastha of oil [.8 kg] for smearing over

the body, one-eight prastha of oil [.1 kg] for the head and for keeping a light in the stables; two bharas of meadow grass [140 kg], 2.25 bharas of ordinary grass (sashpa) [157.5 kg], and 2.5 bharas of dry grass [175 kg]; and

any quantity of stalks  
of various pulses  
(kadankara). (Section  
137)

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"Accumulation of  
dirt in stables,  
failure to supply

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grass, causing an elephant to lie down on hard and unprepared ground, striking on vital parts of its body, permitting a stranger to ride it, untimely riding, leading it to water

through impassable places and allowing it to enter the thick forest are offenses punishable with fines." (Section 137)

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Elephants are classified into four kinds in accordance with the training they are given: that which is tameable (damya), that which is trained for war

(sannahya), that  
which is trained  
for riding  
(aupavahya) and  
rogue elephants  
(vyala).

(Introduction,  
Chapter 32,  
"Training of  
Elephants")

"Throwing sticks,  
mud, stones,  
rods or arrows  
on elephants,  
raising or waving  
the arms against  
elephants shall  
be treated as an  
assault [i.e. with

the same  
punishment as  
assaulting a  
human].( Section  
234)