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## Behind the Blessings

The colorful and intricately designed ornaments and clothes with decorative parasols, aromatic scented incense and flowers all around, festival drumbeats, and crackers popping everywhere; featuring elephants as the most adorned for the massive crowd gatherings. It is one of the most visually striking rituals around Kerala, yet in reality, people rarely see or choose not to bother, what goes behind the scenes as a preparation.

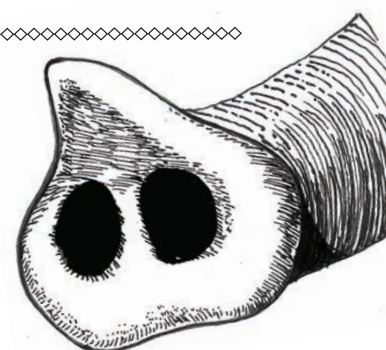
Elephants are chained throughout the day with very limited to no movement space, poorly fed, brutalised using weapons like bull hooks and long polls with poking spikes, mostly kept in solitary, and they undergo a torturous training where they are tied up and beaten for several days to weeks until they obey the mahouts command. Many, if observed closely, have poorly treated wounds on their bodies, blood strains around their ankles, tears oozing from their eyes, and some are even blind and never treated. These prolonged abuses affect both the physical and mental health causing severe stress to these magnificent creatures, all for the sake of human entertainment and blessing ceremonies.

Elephants in the wild are highly intelligent, social animals with complex emotional lives. In the wild, they live in close-knit family groups, travel long distances every day, forage for a wide variety of vegetation, and rely heavily on social bonding for survival and well-being. Adult elephants can walk up to 20–30 km a day, communicate through low-

frequency sounds, and display strong memory. Confinement, isolation, loud noises, and unnatural routines directly contradict their natural ecology and behaviour. Such conditions often lead to psychological distress, explaining why captive temple elephants frequently exhibit signs of trauma and unpredictability.

The tradition of keeping elephants in temples dates back a long time. However, the actual period when temples started associating themselves with elephants remains unclear. Traditionally, elephants were kept to carry water from river to bath deity, stood only for auspicious hours and were otherwise allowed to roam freely in the forest areas associated with temples. With changing times, the temples lost its forest area, and the source of water changed. Over time and the ever changing various cultural norms, they started exploiting elephants by training them to bless the devotees in return for money and food.

The beliefs and practices differ from state to state. In Kerala, elephants have become almost an essential part of major festivals and daily worship. One of the largest gathering includes Thrissur Pooram, placing the elephants as the centre of the celebration. By contrast, temples in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka traditionally keep mostly female elephants for blessings and rituals as the males can be problematic during their musth. In Tamil Nadu, famous temples



like Srirangam and Madurai have well-known elephants that circle the temple offering blessings. In Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh, where temple elephant numbers are smaller, the animal's image still appears in ceremonies. Across regions, the beliefs are similar—a blend of religious symbolism, status, divine association, economic benefit, ritual roles, and traditions that have turned into pride. A 2019 survey by India's Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change (MoEFCC) reported 2,454 elephants in captivity across India. Out of which 96 with temples and religious institutions, 1,687 are privately owned in which most are rented for festivals as ceremonial elephants earn more than \$10,000 per festival. However, trading captive elephants is banned, but legally possessed captive elephants can still be gifted and it creates a significant loophole in the law. Despite bans, wild elephants continue to meet demands in temples

especially, in the southern part of the country. The recent, 2022 amendment to Wildlife (Protection) Act has centralised the power to frame the rules regarding the transfer of the elephants and leaving the state government leaving little to no role.

This brings us to an uncomfortable but necessary question: do we truly need elephants in temples to practice faith? When devotion demands suffering, restraint, and lifelong captivity for a wild animal, it is worth rethinking what tradition really stands for.

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