

The Passing of Dr. Krishnamurthy, An Elephant-wallah Remembered

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October 26, 1987. Topslip, Anamallais Wildlife Sanctuary, Tamil Nadu, India.

Mid-afternoon. Doc, Selvakumar (a.k. Selvam) and I were lodging in Wood House. The wind was blowing softly, and a jungle crow was plaining in a tree beside the bungalow.

A youthful Tamil wearing *lungyi* and T-shirt delivered the tea. Doc had many friends, and from the tone of the dialogue, this young man was obviously one of them. When he left, I asked Doc what it was all about. The young man, Doc explained, was worried about his brother Kuttapan, who had simply disappeared one day a year ago. There was no trace of his whereabouts, so the family had consulted a fortune-teller. The seer told them their beloved one "was still among the living", and that he would join them again when another year had passed.

Young Selvam commented matter-of-factly about the faith held by locals in diviners and seers. Doc frowned.

"I have always had faith and believed in God, and my mother taught this to me. She was married when she was twelve years old, and she was joined by my father when she was fourteen. I was the first born, when she was 15."

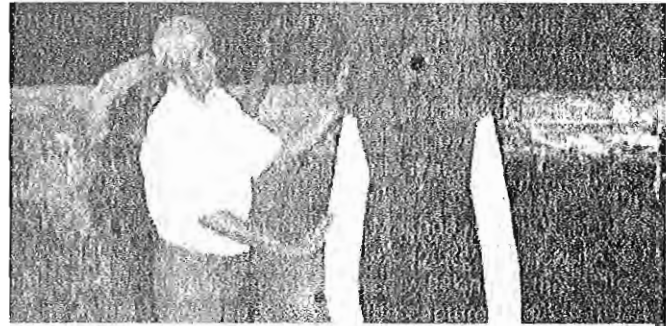
He reflected... "I was 'the Prince of Wales'." Then continued: "During her useful service, she bore ten children. She completed her schooling only to the fifth standard, but she could read and write three languages, Tamil, Telegu, and Malayalam."

Selvam and I were staring into our tea-cups, when Doc's thoughts were hijacked by a related memory. "I will never forget what Mr. Acharya told the graduating class of the boy's school. 'Boys, I have only little advice for you. And that is, marry young. If you marry young, you will be happy. If you marry old, your neighbor will be happy.'"

The sermon was over. His familiar tenor laughter filled the air, and we joined him.

Such was Dr. Krishnamurthy, fondly known to his younger friends as "Dr. K." or just plain "Doc". Doc was a Forest Veterinary Surgeon "of the first order", a humble man of integrity and wisdom, a devout Hindu and a vegetarian. He was a link to that bygone era when the extraction of timber depended on the welfare of the government elephant stable. Thus, Doc was an anachronism, for the days of elephant camps and forest veterinary officers seem to be numbered.

For nearly 30 years Doc was responsible for the health of the state of Tamil Nadu's 150 timber elephants. He spent most of his life in the forest, and his beat covered some of the most picturesque parts of South India. Every few weeks he and his driver would make the day-long jeep ride over the Conoor Rd through the Nilgiris between Anamallais and Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuaries. His knowledge of the region was encyclopaedic. His friends regarded his many



Three decades of work on 150 timber elephants of Tamil Nadu. Photo courtesy Heidi Riddle

experiences as remarkable and even momentous. Doc's life and work were, in fact, part of the local history, but Doc regarded his career with equanimity. Time gave him a kind of peaceful wisdom, and strong ethical convictions seasoned with realism that comes only with experience.

His favorite station was Topslip, in the Anamallais Hills. Go there, and you will see why. It is an ancient elephant range, pocked here and there with collapsing pits used to catch wild elephants. Hike to Mt. Stewart and stroll through the teak plantation. The District Forest Officer has stood watch for 70 years. His tombstone commands: *Simonumentum requiris circumspice*. Rise before dawn and climb the ridge behind Doc's bungalow. From the misty fold of a far valley you will surely hear an elephant calf's petulant outburst. When the updrafts of the afternoon stir the bamboo brakes to creak and groan, walk down the hill to James da Cunha's tea shop, and sit in the darkened room where wrinkled elephant men — cawadies and mahouts — still pause to banter. This was Doc's world, an intact but tenuous outpost.

The Early Years

Vaidyanathan Krishnamurthy was born on 19 June 1929 in Madras. His father was an agricultural officer, and his grandfather and great grandfather were also government servants. His father was frequently transferred between agricultural stations within the Madras Presidency, and when the conditions permitted, his young family accompanied him. So, at an early age young Krishnamurthy learned to read and write both Telegu and Tamil. By the fifth standard he had learned to read English, and greatly enjoyed reading *The Hindu*, particularly the sports page. When his father's duty station was in remote areas lacking schools, Krishnamurthy was sent to live with his uncles in Madras, where he attended local school. He was fond of saying that as a youngster he was a decent "footballer", and also enjoyed cricket.

After the 11th standard he took his intermediate degree at the Trichy National College. Krishnamurthy had a good

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head for mathematics, and his father thought that his first son should become an engineer, but he failed to get a seat in an engineering college. On a lark, he applied to the veterinary college. Though there were as many as 1500 applicants for the 100 seats, candidates were selected from all the Indian states, as well as Ceylon. At the same time, Doc hedged his bets by enrolling at a local Christian college for an honors in mathematics. It was a pleasant surprise, when in 1947 the 18-year-old Krishnamurthy received his letter of acceptance to veterinary school.

Four years later with diploma in hand, Doc took his first job as a veterinarian for the Agricultural Department in what is now Andhra Pradesh, not far from a college where his father had an appointment as a lecturer. Father Krishnamurthy believed that matrimony was more conducive to hard work and stability than the diversions of Madras. Now that his first son was to be gainfully employed, father fixed his son's marriage. A few months later, Doc received his transfer order to the Indian Veterinary Research Institute's sheep farm in the Madurai District. He and his bride took up residence in Kumbum. There, as the resident veterinary officer, he supervised the husbandry of the sheep, monitored the flock's health, treated injuries and illness, and assisted in various other duties. The work-day started at 6:00 am, when Doc rode his bicycle five miles to the farm. There was a two-hour break for the midday meal, and at 8:00 in the evening two to three staff escorts would trot beside him as he peddled home in the dim light.

This was the beginning of Doc's experience with elephants. Kumbum was a community of about 18 small villages laced through the evergreen forests that now adjoin Periyar Sanctuary. The people were *Thevars* or *Harijans*, who made their living by smuggling timber, wayside robbery, poaching, and other acts of treachery. Doc once recounted the local history for me. The leader of the *Thevars*, *Kattabomman*, had refused to pay tribute to the East India Company, so the British caught and hung him, and his people, the *Thevars*, were officially branded as a criminal caste. "Oh God!" Said Doc. "They were fearless fellows. They were always robbers or dacoits. If someone in their community goes to jail, he is honored. But if he takes a loan, never returns it and goes to jail, he will be socially ostracized. They have got honor. If they eat in your house, they will never burgle your house. If they have eaten the salt of your house they will be loyal to you."

Because Doc was an approachable man, the villagers accepted him as a benign member of the community. One of those people was the famous *goonda* of Gudular, Ocha *Thevar*. Then in his 50s, Ocha *Thevar* had to his dubious credit the shooting of a number of Goliath-sized tuskers. "He and his brother used to go after solitary elephants. His brother will just go behind the elephant and try to pull its tail or provoke it. The elephant will turn around, and [Ocha] will bring it down with a single shot. He had shot over 70 or 80 tuskers, single-handed. He and his brother."

It was the forest veterinarian's lot to examine dead elephants, and conducting post-mortems on poached elephants was Doc's baptism as an elephant-wallah. Post-mortems on all elephants were required by the Elephant Preservation Act of 1876, including those found

dead in the jungle. A dozen of the 18 elephants Doc examined in Kumbum were tuskers – the quarry of his neighbors. The carcasses were intact, but for huge bloody sockets where the ivory should have been. The field necropsy of elephants, no matter how ripe, is the ultimate test of the veterinarian's mettle. There was no cut-off time that nullified the need for the examination. Even today, forest veterinarians must conduct a post mortem even if the carcass is a writhing mass of maggots. Naturally, this requires adaptability and an iron-stomach. In Doc's words, "...the range officers and others give some scent or some incense sticks [to the tribal assistants], or even they cut sandal wood trees close by, and they try to burn it for the scent. But by the 3rd or 4th day [after death], you must see the amount of maggots rippling on the carcass. Unbelievable! So we put some pesticide powder all over it



Doc's love for elephants stemmed from a deep love and respect for them. Photo courtesy Heidi Riddle

and kill all the maggots, and wipe it off, literally with a broom, and start doing the post mortem. But then, while we are doing the post mortem, they will be crawling all over everybody. And the stink remains at least for two days."

By the end of his career, Doc reported, "I can say easily I have done more than 370 postmortems, but up to 70-80% of them a detailed post mortem is not possible. Of the 370 postmortems, ...more than 100 of them were poaching kills. 20-30 cases were electrocution, nearly 20-25 were due to anthrax, and 2-3 cases were due to difficult labor, where the fetus got wedged in the pelvic outlet."

The Forest Department Years

The young Doc did not get job satisfaction in Kumbum, and suffered from an insensitive boss (or as he put it, "a teasing type of fellow"). "In a bleak moment" in 1957, Doc decided to transfer to a position with the Forest Department. He recalled with a chuckle that he was the only veterinary graduate of his class who left agricultural work for the hardship and troubles of life in the forest. His posting to Topslip, working for Mr. Gopalan, lasted four and a half years.

It was that time in India's history when Gandhiji's wish to reorganize the country on a linguistic basis came true, and this had a consequence for elephants. As the old Madras Presidency was carved up into the newly created states of

Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala, so was the government elephant stable. The population of nearly 170 elephants used for timber extraction in the Madras Presidency was divided mostly between the two new states of Andhra Pradesh and Kerala, and Tamil Nadu was left with only 26 elephants.

To restock the stable, the new Tamil Nadu Forest Department started capturing wild elephants, and from 6 to 10 elephants were caught per year using the traditional pit method of the Mudumalai and Anamallais Forests. Doc plunged into every aspect of elephant medicine associated with the capturing and training wild elephants, as well as working trained elephants for timber extraction. Tamil Nadu's elephant stable grew, and eventually the Theppakadu, Kozhikamuthi, and Varagaliar camps were stocked more or less to capacity, though working groups were usually on assignment dragging timber somewhere in the forest.

Working with elephants demands patience, and Doc's peaceful nature and acceptance of routine suited him well to his work. He was up before daybreak, and long before the camp was moving, he had taken his cold bath and done puja. He was bright-eyed and bushy-tailed when the mahouts rode or led their charges back into camp after a night of grazing in the forest. But if an animal had strayed, it didn't matter, Doc would find time to examine it later in the day. He moved with the pace of the camp, which was never forced. When he had finished his rounds in Anamallais, his driver delivered him to Mudumalai, and he went through the same routine again. Then he would take leave to visit his family, and when that was done, the cycle began again.

Doc's intimacy with the elephants and the tribal community rewarded him with a remarkable fund of knowledge, and he remembered the finest details, especially when it came to dates and quantitative information. He knew each animal's name, medical history, and peculiarities. He also knew their mahouts, but the elephants were the center of his universe. It was always, "That is Saraswati's mahout," and not the other way around.

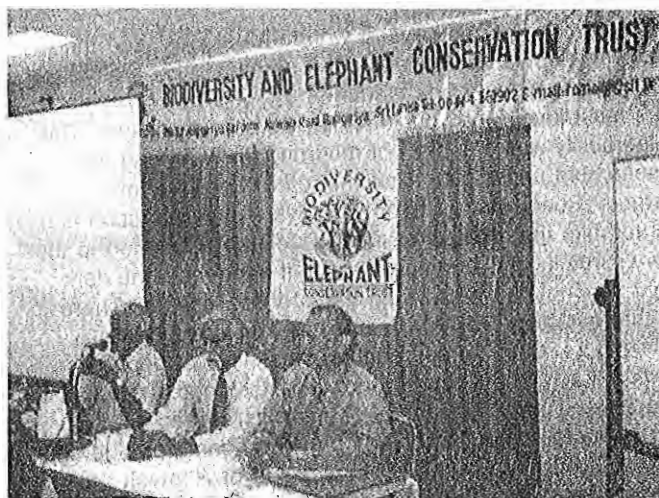
The elephant camp is a curious slice of life, and every forest veterinarian is obligated to counsel and tend the mahouts who are the elephants' keepers. Doc was something of a father-figure. When Doc arrived, men and children encircled him with childlike awe, while women watched from their huts with naked babies perched on their hips. The mahouts reported the ailments of their charges, and sought news from the other camps. Once an old mahout beseeched him for medicine. Doc pressed his ear to the man's bony back and listened "congested lungs". The next day the driver delivered the pills. If a mahout had a financial problem, Doc would give him some cash, and when salaries were delayed for several months, Doc made loans, knowing he would never collect the reimbursement. There were domestic problems too, from love spats to husband killing, but Doc could do nothing about these things.

When I met Doc in 1981 he was spending most of the year in these camps examining and treating his charges. Two decades of dedicated work among the elephants and

people of South India gave Doc a remarkable fund of knowledge and a lifetime of unique experiences, which many of us came to treasure. His breadth of knowledge came close to the old Indian saying he himself applied to P.D. Stracey, the Anglo-Indian elephant wallah: "What he doesn't know about elephants, isn't worth knowing."

Senior Elephant Wallah

When he reached the mandatory retirement age of 60, Doc wasn't ready to go. For want of a suitable replacement, the Forest Department gave him a stay of another year, but then the inevitable happened. Fortunately, the Bombay Natural History Society was embarking on its Asian Elephant Ecology Project (1983-1993). J.C. Daniel, then the Society's Secretary, fully appreciated Doc's potential value, both as an elephant veterinarian and mentor to the young scientists



A session at Sri Lanka. Photo courtesy Jacob Cheeran

who had the good fortune to be selected as the project's field researchers. The team consisted of a series of promising young ecologists, including Ajay Desai, Sivaganesan, Ramesh Kumar, Baskaran and others. Then there were the Kurruba trackers. Their jungle lore insured the team's safety. They were also a conduit to the local tribal community that could provide intelligence about the jungle. Doc became senior advisor, and Bear House, in Mudumalai National Park became field headquarters. Whether it was wanted or not, Doc gave fatherly advice and counsel, and when someone breached ethical standards, he had a way of dragging the perpetrator and the issue out before his peers for drroll commentary. It was quite effective. But overall, the chemistry of the team was very good.

Everyone developed a strong affection for the four trackers. There was talkative Krishna, and deferential Kethan. Chenna, was a man of few words. He was the exceptional barefooted tracker who guided the men through the jungle with only a billhook, and ironically, was himself killed by a tiger one day in 1994 when searching for honey. Finally, there was the gentle and bumbling Bomma, whose appearance underestimated his talent for cooking and romantic entanglements. They were all deferential chaps, but they knew they were appreciated. One day in 1989, as we lunched at the Forest Rest House in Anchetty, I requested Doc to ask Krishna if he knew any wild animal



Memento being given to Dr. Krishnamurthy in Sri Lanka during a training programme. Photo courtesy Jacob Cheeran

legends. Krishna told several wonderful stories, and the best was "How the elephant lost its scrotum".

Like most jungle folk, our trackers were superstitious. This vulnerability was a subject of recurring levity among the researchers until Chenna encountered the ghost of Kargudy Road. Since Chenna's powers of observation had earned him the greatest respect, Doc's boys listened to the story carefully. As you might expect, it happened one dark night as Chenna was walking back to Bear House. There on the road ahead of him, a small creature caught his eye. Thinking it a civet, he approached stealthily. It stopped moving. It was black and round, like a schmoo. Then it just disappeared. A minute later, Chenna discovered the little ghost was following him. It was playing a game of hide and seek with our man, when the headlights of Ramesh Kumar's jeep came into view. Chenna ran to the jeep, and told his story. Ghosts were no longer a laughing matter, and the young men heard knocking at the door late at night, and had trouble sleeping. Doc, however, lost no sleep. The Ghost of Kargudi road didn't concern him.

A hand-reared Giant Malabar Squirrel had free run of the bungalow and became the project mascot. This charming bug-eyed rodent had the endearing habit of perching on Doc's shoulders. With its paws on his bald head it would survey its domain like a preacher at the pulpit. Doc's standard reaction: "He thinks he has found a coconut."

That was camp life. In addition to daily tracking of the radio-collared elephants and cow herds, the team was called to respond to a variety of requests. There were many callings for Doc's skills and experience: darting elephants for radio-collaring, translocating waifs, and consulting on degraded elephant range in Mizoram with Ajay Desai in the Northeast. This was the period when I worked closely with Doc to help him put his extensive knowledge into print. The best method was to get him talking, turn on the cassette recorder, and interject questions at appropriate moments. I used to send him the transcriptions, and he always accused me of removing the verbs from his narratives. A small group of us accompanied Doc to elephant camps in South India and Sri Lanka, and examined elephants. I bought Doc a set of forester's calipers for measuring elephants, and we developed a standard set of

measurements. Doc hurled himself into the work, and visited elephant camps in the South and Northeast of India to collect measurements. He made unscheduled appearances at the elephant beauty pageants of Kerala with his ominous looking measuring devices, and debunked some of Malabar's much-vaunted "records". It was almost impossible for me to get him to xerox materials. He preferred to meticulously hand-copy the records. Doc also systematically compiled the first studbook of domestic elephants for Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, which was added to the international studbook.

By this time, Doc's notoriety as a charismatic elephant-wallah was spreading through India, and in the U.S. In the late 1990's, he attended the Elephant Managers Workshop in Oklahoma City. Soon the British were aware of him too, and several film producers in India and abroad became interested in doing a film about his work.

Doc once told me a troubling story of "a good girl", one of the Topslip elephants. The Conservator of Forests wanted to cut back on the elephant stock for economic reasons. Doc opposed the idea, and pleaded her case. She was old and due to become a pensioner. The DFO and Conservator weren't convinced by sentimentality. As Doc put it, "Their wills prevailed", and so the aging creature was sold to a "dismissed policeman" in Coimbatore where she was used to run chores. "She works long and hard hours on the asphalt and her sores go untreated. What hurts me most", said Doc, "is that whenever this elephant sees me, she recognizes me and immediately comes to me."

Doc's Other Stories

Doc enjoyed a good laugh, and was fond of telling stories. His sense of humor resonated to the work of P.G. Wodehouse as much as the bawdy anecdotes "Norton K.C." (King's Council), the legendary colonial lawyer. And since he didn't mind being the butt of a joke, he was great fun to play the fool with. Below are a few stories about Doc.

The Mrs. Krishnan Story

In October, 1973, during the Wildlife Week Celebration, Mrs. Newman, the Principal of the Krishnammal College in Coimbatore, and Mrs. Krishnan, wife of the famous Indian wildlife photographer, invited Doc to speak about wildlife. Since this is women's college, the student body in attendance were all women. They found Doc's propriety and general decorum most charming, and applauded enthusiastically when he finished his presentation. Doc was clearly a little flustered, and Mrs. Newman detected his vulnerability. "You can face 100 elephants, but wither before 100 girls?" she asked. A coherent rejoinder was not forthcoming. The ladies had him at their mercy, and Doc could only mutter and chuckle self-consciously. Much to his relief, the tittering finally died down, and Mrs. Krishnan announced with a smile that it was time for tea. When peace was restored, Doc felt that a compliment was in order. Mrs. Krishnan's devotion to her husband's photography seemed deserving. After noting Krishnan's photographic achievements, he observed that "Mrs. Krishnan is very dedicated, and as Mr. Krishnan knows, she is a very good assistant in the dark room." Mrs. Krishnan replied with composure. "Dr. Krishnamurthy, every Indian

housewife is expected to be." A great peal of feminine laughter filled the room, and Doc knew the joke was on him. When Doc really laughed well, a small distinct dimple appeared high in each cheek. At that moment, I am sure they were clearly etched on his kind face.

How big is Ganapati?

15 January 1985. After a long silence in a taxi going to Trichur, the following difference of opinion suddenly transpired between D. K. Lahiri Choudhury and Doc. The subject of contention, Ganapati, was an elephant at Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary.

Lahiri Choudhury: "Ganapati is now 9 feet at the shoulder."
Doc: "No, she is slightly less".

(Pause).

Lahiri Choudhury: "Ganapati is 9 feet at the shoulder."

Doc: "I have measured her, and she is 8 feet 10 and a half inches."

(A longer pause).

Lahiri Choudhury: "Ganapati is 9 feet."

No further words were said on the subject. They agreed to disagree.

The passage is imminent

Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary, Machan No. 2, 20 January 1989.

After lunch we proceeded to an impoundment in the forest. The machan was ideally situated to watch the wildlife that comes there daily to water, and the elephants that bathe. When we arrived thirty-four elephants of all ages were disporting themselves on the banks and in the water. We stalked closer to the oblivious bathers and climbed into the machan, where I made sound recordings and the others shot photos. Photography and recording don't mix, but we all had a thrill watching the animals at relatively close range. The arrival of a bus and three cars of tourists decided us to end the session. Gratified that we had

outsmarted the tourists, we were walking back to the car when Dhriti announced a change of schedule.

"I am afraid I'm having to get back to the bungalow to take care of some urgent business. This is something that really cannot wait."

"Fine", said Doc, authorizing our departure, "then let's be on our way." He ordered the driver to return to the bungalow past haste.

We boarded the jeep and started up the road, but encountered another jeep was blocking our way. An intense looking German tourist was taking pictures of two giant squirrels on a limb over the road.

"My goodness, said Dhriti, "I hope this delay isn't for long."

"If it is", said I, "we will all have to suffer the consequences."

The German sensed our impatience, and we continued on our way.

When we arrived at the junction 5 minutes later, Dhriti reported, "I am relieved to report there is no longer a state of emergency. Let's go and watch the pigs."

But Doc insisted, "It is too early for that now, and the pigs won't be there till 6:00. I want you to visit the toilet."

Said Dhriti, "No, no. This is no longer necessary. If I have to, I'll disappear into the bushes like a field man, but now we must use the daylight hours to our best advantage."

Doc responded, "I am sorry Doctor, but I have to disagree because this is like a parturition. The first contraction is like a false alarm, but the passage is imminent."

We drove on to the resthouse.

In memoriam of elephant doctor (Dr. K)

V. Kannan*

Presently I am working with BNHS. When I was studying Wildlife Biology in AVC college, my teacher Dr. M.C. Sathyanarayana often used to recollect about Dr. K., whenever topic of elephant arises. He always told about Dr. K.'s hard field work during those days (with the absence of vehicles) in the elephant jungles. I frankly say that I showed more interest and was excited hearing about the elephant hero, compared to my studies. Some of us (batch 1997-99) had to go for Mudumalai WLS for our study. There we had the golden opportunity to meet Dr. K. at IISC Masinagudy Field Station. Those hours all of us really forgot about the worries of the future, because of his encouragement and strong advice to show 100% involvement and love in the work we do, by way of his ISI humour. We are lucky and proud to have been with him for atleast a few days, at Mudumalai WLS and few hours at Snake Park, Guindy, Chennai.

We look back and remember how Dr. K. boosted us by way of encouragement to the youngsters. Like his lovable elephant with which he worked Dr. K. has left gaint foot prints on the hearts of all his co-workers. He will be missed and not forgotten.

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