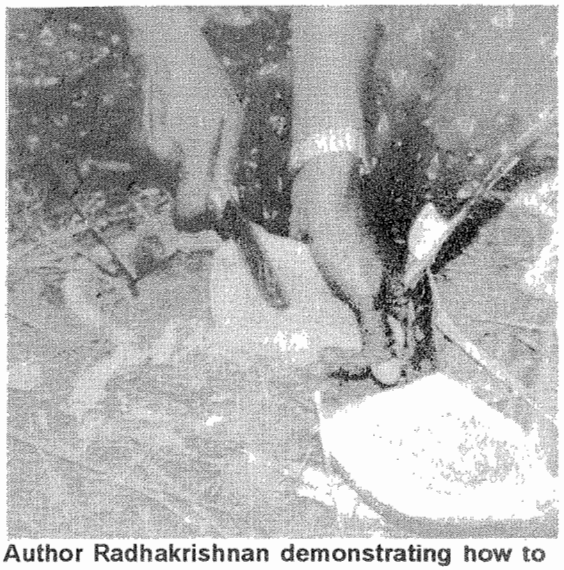
SOME PRACTICAL THINGS A MAHOUT MUST KNOW

Shri Ponnappan* and Shri Radhakrishnan**

Mahouts should know :

-- Climbing a palm/ coconut tree
-- Tying the palm leaves into a bundle.
-- Preparing food for the elephant
-- Preparing coconut husks for bathing the elephants
-- Bathing an elephant
-- To dust the elephant if its back is muddy
-- To prepare some traditional medicines for ailments.
-- To identify ailments
-- To swim
-- To identify various fodder species
-- Identifying medicinal plants
-- Sharpening a knife
--- Foot and verbal commands
--- Logging
-- Preparing ropes or Vakkai
-- *Ezhunnallippu* practice (temple festivals)
-- *Marmmams*
-- Using the *thotti* and stick



Author Radhakrishnan demonstrating how to prepare coconut husk for bathing the elephant

There is a lot to being a mahout than just mounting, dismounting or even leading an elephant around. A complete mahout is one who knows all of the things mentioned above. This is a profession which is very demanding on a person's time and energy both physical and mental. It requires a lot of skill and stamina, reflexes, good sense of discrimination and some virtues like patience and perseverence and sense of responsibility. There is no short cut to being a mahout and one has to accept the hardships of the profession. A mahout must also be self reliant because there may be times when he may be alone with out assistants.

-- The most important virtue is common sense. He must also have a quick and sharp mind at work during crisis.

-- An elephant has certain requirements which are essential to keep it happy and healthy. It has to be fed and watered on time. The dung of the previous night must be cleared first thing in the morning, as the elephants do not step on their dung and will find it difficult to stand with it so close to their feet. The mahout must always have his stick and *thotti* (ankus) with him whenever he approaches the elephant.

-- A bath is very important to an elephant and a mahout must never skip this unless inevitable. After an exhausting day, working with logs, the elephant must be bathed well and only after this should the mahout retire for the day. Mahouts have been known to ignore emergency calls from their families and put off familial matters until they have tended to their elephant's needs for the day.

-- A mahout must be constantly aware of every single movement of his elephant. If he is in a public place his eyes and ears must be open to every activity going around in the area that might upset the elephant and cause it to jump or bolt.

-- A person with a bad temper must never take up this profession. He may use the elephant as a means to vent his anger. He must have tremendous patience and maturity.

-- When standing in a public place like a main road or a crowded street the mahout must watch out if the elephant is misbehaving. It may try to reach out for food from nearby shops, might try and chase hen, cattle, dogs, children, or a small shift of feet might crush people standing close by etc. Some other things to watch for is if the elephant is standing close to a pole especially electric pole or a wall. They may try to lean or rub their body or feet and topple the structure. Electric poles are very dangerous as they may electrocute the elephant. A spark may upset elephants who are afraid of fire and cause them to bolt.

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A lot of superstition and myths are associated with the profession and the elephants. Gut feeling and intuition are given a lot of importance.

-- The elephant is considered divine and so one is not supposed to kick it or step on it wearing slippers. The slippers are usually thrown up by the other maout and they are either tied on to the body chains or are squeezed into the space under the rope around the neck. One must always have a settled mind before mounting and the traditional Hindu gesture of touching a religious object with the hands and placing them on one's forehead is observed before mounting. If the mahout feels queasy or restless in his mind for any particular reason at the start of the day before unchaining his elephant he must not unchain the elephant as some thing unlucky is bound to happen.

-- Also it is believed that any money gained by deciet in this profession will eventually or immediately cause a negative impact on the person who cheated. For example if a second mahout after a hard day's work is cheated of his rightful share of money by the first mahout , definitely the first mahout will some how fall out of luck and be forced to spend double the amount of money he gained. This is also true if the elephant is deprived of proper food and water after a hard day's work by the mahout.

-- Mahouts generally believe that elephants are affected by bad luck or black eye. That is why when an elephant is being fed rice a small piece from the first ball of rice is bitten into and spat out by the mahout to ward off black eye or bad luck from any one watching. There is a man in Kerala who is supposed to have a very negative effect on elephants. It is said that if he passes close to an elephant and passes a comment that elephant will immediately bolt or create some problem. After which only he can restrain the elephant. He is said to have been making a living out of this.

-- While riding the elephant one must mind low lying wires, branches and ropes. The rider may hurt himself if he is not mindful of these. At times like these the elephant must be made to go slow or manouevered to avoid the obstacle. Similiarly a rider must also look out for concrete or cement slabs that are too thin to bear the elephant's weight and also glass pieces or sharp stones. Such tracks must be avoided. There have been many instances of elephants hurting themselves by falling into septic tanks or holes after walking over seemingly strong slabs. The mahout must realise that he is responsible for the elephant's safety as well as his own.

-- Mahouts must always were their *dhoti* high (above the ankle) so that they do not trip on it while mounting or dismounting.

-- He must always carry some weapon on him, preferably a knife. This is not only an act of self defence but also comes handy at several occcasions; to remove glass or sharp objects from the elephant's feet, to shell coconuts, cut ropes, to trim coconut husk etc.

-- Mahouts must also know to bargain or manage to collect fodder for elephants. He must always keep an eye out for palm and coconut trees wherever he goes. Good relationship with the public will enable him at times to get fodder free of cost.

-- When an elephant runs away from a mahout and is finally captured after it has done a lot of damage to property and life then usually what most mahouts do is chain the elephant and physically torture it for as long as they can. This is a wrong and negative approach. An elephant that has mis-behaved is like a guilty child. Instead of punishing it if one soothes it with words and some food, it will be more rewarding as its faith in the mahout will be implicit and on another occassion when it bolts it will come back to the mahout when called out.

-- Elephants love to spray mud on themselves. They dig up a hole with their fore foot on the ground and grab a trunkful of loosened mud and spray it. This can be exasperating to a mahout who has spent hours scrubbing and bathing it, all the more if in preparation for any event or function. So mahouts usually discourage the elephant from doing this. They scatter some of its own dung on the ground where the hole has been made for digging out mud. The elephants are repulsed by the smell of their own dung and they will ignore the area.

-- When tying the *Kaccha Kayar*, the rope around the neck, one must make the elephant place its fore feet firmly on the ground or it may kick forward.

-- The commands given to the elephant must be loud and strong. It should be equivalent to a slap or a beating.

-- When walking along the elephant's side one must be careful of the movement of the elephant's feet. If the elephant happens to take a step sideways or quicken, increase its pace suddenly for some reason, then the mahout will get kicked and he may fall and be trampled over. So it is safe to walk close to the body

Comments and Opinions

There are some prescribed standards that judge the appeal of an elephant by its posture. An elephants that holds its head high is very much desired and appreciated. This is called *"Thalaeduppu"* in Malayalam. At temple festivals the elephant with the best *"Thalaedduppu"* is chosen to perform the lead role. Out of competetiveness the mahouts prod the elephant's chin with a sharp object to force it to keep its head high. This is cruel and must be discouraged.

There must be laws that demand the elephants not be walked on the tarred roads during the hot hours of the day.

Laws which demand that the mahouts not be changed so frequently for an elephant.

Timings for *ezhunnalippu* be changed to less hot hours of the day.

Have shift system for long *ezhunnalippus* with two elephants alternating.

Mahouts and owners be on good terms.

There be a standard or fixed rate of payment given to head mahout as well as his assistants.

BABY ELEPHANT CARE

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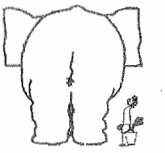

Taking care of baby elephants in the initial stages is very demanding and tiring. It is much more easier in the case of babies with mothers but babies that are orphaned are difficult to care for. The keeper has to constantly be near the baby day and night and will have to spend sleepless nights near the baby to meet its demands.

For orphaned babies the diet consists of cow's milk mixed with double the quantity of water and well pounded turmeric . Sometimes glucose is also added to the milk. The milk should be boiled well and maintained at a warm temperature. This can be easily done by placing the milk bottle in a container of boiling water. The consistency of the milk should be thin. Turmeric prevents worms and removes any sort of poison. Only fresh milk should be given.

Baby elephants suffer from diarrhoea frequently and they are given the juice of tender coconuts during these times. The mahouts believe that the babies fall sick periodically so that they gain height and become healthier.

Babies with their mother start eating other fodder very soon along with their mother. The other babies will have to be coerced to eat palm and coconut leaves and bamboo. Salt is applied to the tips of the leaves and branches so that the babies will start chewing the leaves and finally relish it. They are all very voracious eaters at this age.

All this while they are kept inside cages because excessive human contact is harmful to their health. After certain period they are tied outside the cages and a bucket of water is placed next to it.

At 15 months of age their diet consists of 10 lit. of milk twice a day, 4 kgs of *'Panchapullu'* (grass variety) twice a day, and rice. Besides that they are fed jaggery, Vitamins, glucose and tonics and also salt water is sprinkled. The babies are taken out for baths and also for short walks down the road to get them accustomed to people and vehicles.

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