

Cultural and Social Nexus between the Elephants and Sri Lankan Society Since Ancient Times

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Abstract

Asian Elephants being highly social mammals have been identified as a 'Natural Treasure' since ancient times. The elephant's presence in Sri Lankans religious and socio-cultural events has not diminished. According to Mahavamsa, there had been a state elephant krall of King Devanampiyatissa (2323-2273 yr BP). As well, elephants were also engaged to accompany theras, troops, chariots and in the construction of the monastery for bhikkhunis (Hatthalhaka-Vihara). The elephant Kandula became the companion of Dutugamunu (2177-2153 yr BP), serving as his warrior elephant during the wars and for the decisive duel with King Elara that led to the unification of Sri Lanka. Later, elephants were also used by the King Dutugemunu for the festival of enshrining relics in Ruvanveliseya at Anuradhapura. Our Kings have donated elephants to temples for religious festival traditions; such as for the

annual Perahera of the Tooth Relic, the Tooth and the Bowl Relics and for troops and chariots from 4th to 16th century. After the Kandyan Kingdom fell to the British in 1815, the custody of the Tooth Relic was handed over to the Maha Sanga. With the inauguration of the Kandy Esala Perahera during this period, elephants were used for religious purposes and were also donated to temples on occasions.

Sri Lankan elephants are widely distributed from sea level to the highest mountain ranges. tourists can enjoy watching and photographing within national parks and in few other locations, the opportunity to go on elephant back safaris. The intensity of Human Elephant Conflict in Sri Lanka, particularly in rural areas adjacent to elephant habitats, has been escalating and reports show that nearly 2,000 elephants have died during the past 15 years due to gunshot injuries, electrocution, illegal actions taken by farmers to protect their crops, land mines during the armed conflict, falling into unprotected agricultural wells and abandoned gem pits and collision with trains.

Keywords: *Natural treasure, Elephant with Society, Cultural and Social Nexus, Sri Lankan Society, Ancient times.*

Introduction

The species *Elephas maximus* is used to identify the Asiatic elephant, and is the only living species of the genus *Elephas*. This species is distributed in Southeast Asia from India in the west to Borneo in the east. The subspecies of the elephants are recognized by many scientists: as *Elephas maximus maximus* from Sri Lanka (Deraniyagala 1955), Borneo elephants were classified as a unique subspecies (*Elephas maximus borneensis*) based on morphological differences from other populations (Deraniyagala 1950, 1955), the Indian *Elephas maximus indicus* from mainland Asia, and *Elephas maximus sumatranus* from the island of Sumatra. Asian elephants are the largest living terrestrial animals in Asia (Shoshani and Eisenberg 1982: pp, 1-8). Likewise, Fernando et al (2003) represents that the DNA Analysis Indicates that Asian elephants are native to Borneo and are therefore a high priority for conservation.

Elephants being highly social mammals, have been identified as a 'Natural Treasure' since ancient times in many Asian countries. As the largest terrestrial living animal in Asia, the elephants brighten the wetlands, grasslands, scrublands, forests and jungles. As a single elephant, and to a family or herd with young and calves, they add pulchritude to the nature. Asian elephants have been well-regarded for centuries in many countries including Sri Lanka, playing an important role in the continent's cultural and religious as well as economic activities. Elephants also play a critical role in maintaining habitats as a keystone species. But their habitat is shrinking and Asian elephants are now in danger of extinction. Due to population increase and consequent

loss of elephant natural habitat, Human-Elephant Conflict (HEC) is now on the increase. Despite this, the elephant's presence in our religious and socio-cultural events has not diminished.

Elephants participate in annual temple processions all over Sri Lanka, and appear often (Figs 1&2). They are richly caparisoned treasure. Other elephants are permanently kept in temples as a status symbol. Often these poor animals are heavily chained and restricted in their movements. There are also serious concerns about a sharp decline in mahout skills and accusations of abuse and cruelty are commonplace. This paper reviews and highlights the significant cultural, social as well as economic nexus and turning points between the elephants in Sri Lankan society since ancient times.

Turning Points of Elephants Pursuit

Elephants are 'Natural Treasure', highly social mammals already face severe human disturbance, which is set to accelerate with projected anthropogenic environmental transformations. Pursuit of elephants In Sri Lanka no other animal has been associated for so long with the people in their traditional and religious activities as the elephant. This association dates back to the pre-Christian era, more than 5,000 years. According to *the Mahavamsa, the Great Chronicle of Sri Lanka*, the King Pandu, the City of Madhura in southern (India) had sent elephants, horses and wagons to the King Vijaya (2559-2521 yr BP) as gifts to the King Pandu's daughter and others for the Royal Consecration (W. Geiger 1912, C XIII-72).

Ancient Sinhalese kings captured and tamed elephants, which used to abound in the country. Elephants were used to transport material for construction activities in ancient times. For example, the ancient cities of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa etc., now only their ruins remaining, would not have been built had their giant stones not been moved into place by elephants. They were also used for the construction of the large reservoirs that were the basis of the hydraulic civilization of the country (Fernando et al, 2011: 93-103; Jayewadene, 2012).

There had been a state elephant krall for the King Devanampiyatissa (2323-2273 yr BP). As a religious matter, the King ordered to cleanse the elephant krall for the gathering be able to observe the Great Thera Mahinda during the preaching the Devadūta-suttanta. Also, the elephants were accompanied by the theras, the troops, chariots and the construction during convent for the bhikkhunis (Hatthalhaka-Vihara). Likewise, the elephant *Kandula* became the companion of Dutugemunu (2177-2153 yr BP), serving as his mount during the wars with the climactic duel with King Elara that led to the unification of Sri Lanka. Later, elephants were also used by the King Dutugemunu for the festival of enshrining of the relics of Ruvanveliseya of Anuradhapura.

Our Kings have donated elephants to temples for religious festival traditions; such as the Tooth Relic, the Tooth and the Bowl Relics and for troops and chariots from 4th to 16th century). The Modern Kandy Perahera dates back to the reign of the King, Kirthi Sri Rajasinghe (1747–1781 CE). During this time, the Tooth Relic was considered

as private property of the King, and the public never got a chance to worship it. After the Kandyan Kingdom fell to the British in 1815, the custody of the Relic, and was handed over to the *MahaSanga*. With commenced Kandy Esala Perahera in this period, elephants were used for religious purposes including donations to temples.

During the colonial period from 1505 to 1948, the wet zone was converted to commercially for plantation of spices such as coffee, tea, rubber, cocoa, coconut etc, and became heavily settled. Until 1830, elephants were so plentiful that their destruction was encouraged by the government, and rewards were paid for any that was killed. In the first half of the 19th century, forests in the montane zone were cleared large-scale for the planting of above mentioned crops. During the British rule, many bull elephants were killed by trophy hunters (Fig.3). One of the army majors is credited with having shot over 1,500 elephants, and two others are reputed to have shot half that number each. Many other sportsmen shot about 250-300 animals during this time. Between 1829 and 1855 alone, more than 6,000 elephants were captured and shot (Jayawardena 2012). Elephants abetted in the agricultural pursuits of man in earlier times. They assisted in the hauling logs and clearing the land. They were also used for ploughing some of these lands. The British used them to transport machinery and other heavy goods to the plantations (Jayewardene 2001).

Elephants were a common element in cultural and social nexus and heraldry for over two thousand years and remained so through British colonial rule. The emblem and the flag of Ceylon Government from 1875 to 1948 included

an elephant and even today many institutions use the Sri Lankan elephant in their coat of arms and insignia. An important cultural symbiosis have continued to exist between the elephant and humans for over two thousand years, and no religious procession was complete without its retinue of elephants, and many large Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka had their own elephants.

Present day, the elephants do a significant role in the Kandy Perahera, and they are used for different ritual activities. The elephant carries on its back a Buddhist flag as a third event, which shows that the perahera is mainly a Buddhist event. The Fourth comes the *Peramunarala* (officer in the vanguard) on the back of an elephant (Fig. 4). He carries an ola leaf book wrapped in a piece of white cloth. This is immediately followed by the *hewisi* band of the Maligawa led by its four official tom-tom beaters. The *Gajanayake Nilame* (the official responsible for the elephants taking part in the perahera) Kandy Esala Perahera, who wielding a goad rides on an elephant next (Fig. 5). The brightest, most outstanding feature of the perahera is the Maligawa Tusker (the tusker of the temple of the Tooth Relic) carrying the relic casket (Fig. 6). The majestic Maligawa Tusker is flanked by two other companion elephants. The gorgeously illuminated, bejeweled casket is held in position on the back of the tusker with guy ropes on the four sides. Following the relic casket marches the *Diyawadane Nilame* (the lay custodian and the chief administrator of the Dalada Maligawa, Fig. 7) amidst a troupe of dancers and drummers (Wasala 2012).

Except ceremonies and Temple Work Sri Lanka, today domesticated elephants are engaged in the following types of work: logging – particularly in forested areas and timber mills or depots; construction – elephants are still used to carry steel, sand and other building materials; tourism - elephants are used to give tourists rides (although this use is far less developed than that in Thailand); and elephant orphanage at Pinnawela operated by the National Zoological Gardens is also a big tourist attraction (Fig. 8).

Domesticated elephants in Sri Lanka face difficulties finding useful and gainful employment. Logging in forested areas and timber mills or depots for a long time, it is the most painstaking and important work undertaken by the elephant is skidding logs. The elephant sets off carrying its skidding gear around its neck to the stump site. The mahout leads the elephant with the assistance of a choker-man or foot mahout. The foot mahout is often engaged for the day on a casual basis by the concession holder. By the time the elephant reaches the stump site the tree would have been topped, de-limbed and bucked to convenient lengths. The bucking is done to match the volume or weight of log that can be skidded by the elephant. All logs would have a minimum diameter of 30 cm, the length varying from 7m to 10m depending on the capacity of each elephant, and could weigh up to 2 tons (FAO 1999).

However, there are other factors, such as the shape of the log (round; with or without buttresses); the type of terrain; surface evenness; firmness of the soil; etc., which will have a bearing on the log volume and weight that can be safely skidded by the elephant. Sometimes skidding is

along a watercourse or on dry land, or both. The elephant has a distinct preference to skidding along watercourses, as it can quench its thirst and splash water over it to control body temperature. Skidding in streams can be less strenuous since the boulders offer little resistance and logs slide over them easily. An elephant's foot is susceptible to skin disease when skidding in marshy conditions, but in water streams the toes are kept clean and it is thus more hygienic. Besides these advantages, the water gives buoyancy to the log, thus lessening the effort required to move a given weight. A disadvantage is the presence of large boulders which can jam the log or make progress slow and slippery. Ergonomically, skidding in water is ideal as it minimizes the possibility of heat stress, and is less strenuous, although it can disturb the bottom and leave bark and dung in the stream.

In Sri Lanka, elephants are made to skid logs basically by two methods, selected according to terrain type: the harness method, or the side method. The harness method is used when the terrain is flat and offers no danger of the log rolling down a slope. If this happens there is always a risk of injury to the elephant as there is no way of immediately releasing the log from the harness. Skidding on slopes is done by the side method, so that the elephant, when sensing danger, can simply jettison the bit from its mouth and release the log instantly. An elephant does not take any risk if there is danger - however much the mahout urges it. If the road is located downhill, the elephant can be made to slide logs down a chute or to roll them downhill, depending on the surface characteristics. When rolling logs, the elephant uses its front legs, knees, trunk or even the forehead to push the log (Fig 9). For haulage on hillsides and

narrow paths, the animal should work on the uphill side and not on the lower side, as there is always the danger that the log can roll down and injure the animal. Today, elephants are still used to carry steel, sand and other building materials. However, over time, modern machinery gradually replaced the elephant. The machine was quicker and more efficient than a slow moving elephant. This resulted in the rapidly diminishing potential for the elephant to earn its keep.

The Sri Lankan Elephant is the prominent figure in Sri Lankan wildlife and this is a rightful honour for the majestic and intelligent beast crowned the largest of the Asian elephants. Although, the elephants are one of the country's main tourist attractions, and tourist promotional material by the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau, Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, as well as the country's national carrier, Sri Lankan Airlines uses elephant parading cultural events such as the Kandy Esela Perahera and the Navam Perahera in Colombo, as well as elephant rides and the Dehiwela Zoo (Fig 10), Sigiriya (Fig.11) and many other places, which chains elephants, to woo in more tourists to the country.

Sri Lankan elephants were widely distributed from sea level to the highest mountain ranges. During the British rule, many bull elephants were killed by trophy hunters. Between 1829 and 1855 alone, more than 6,000 elephants were captured and shot. However, tourists who travel to Sri Lanka can enjoy watching and photographing elephant in national parks and going on back safaris. A visit to Sri Lanka would be incomplete without a glimpse of these magnificent creatures that can be observed within safeguarded National

Parks such as Yala, Wilpattu, Wasgamuwa, Minneriya, and Udawalawa. Be sure to observe the astounding Elephant Gathering in Minneriya during the months of July to October, a spectacle not to be missed.

A found favorite among the locals as well as a tourist is the Pinnawela Elephant Orphanage. This remarkable elephant orphanage currently operates one of the world's most successful elephant breeding programs by taking in and caring for injured or orphaned elephants. Watching dozens of these elephants walk past you as they splash into the river at bath time and feeding an adorable baby elephant out of a giant milk bottle is a wonderful experience that will make your visit all the more worthwhile.

For the promotion of tourist activities, it is needed to train elephants to meet the owners' objective. Accordingly the cruel trainers molests and follows harmful and painful activities. In order to make elephants submit to elephant rides and other human interactions they are taken from their mothers when babies and forced through a horrific training process. This involves physical restraints, inflicting severe pain and withholding food and water. By the time tourist come to ride an elephant, they may look at peace, but this is because their spirit has been broken.

The intensity of human elephant complicit (HEC) in Sri Lanka clearly shows it as anthropogenic events. In rural areas adjacent to elephant habitats has been encroaching rapidly, and reports show that nearly 2000 elephants were killed during the past 15 years with gunshot injuries, and other causes of mortality were electrocution and due to illegal actions taken by farmers to protect their crops,

land mines during the LTTE-armed conflict in Sri Lanka, accidental falling into agricultural wells and abandoned gem pits, lightning and collision with trains (Fig. 12). Very recently, brutality and annoyance for the elephants predominate with politicians and their followers appear as highly damage by us or our society.

Conclusion

Elephants have been respected for centuries in Asia, including Sri Lanka, playing an important role in the continent's religion, culture and economy. They also play a significant role in maintaining the natural forests. But their habitat is shrinking and Asian elephants are now endangered. From ancient time to date, elephants are adjunctive on religious activities, especially on *Peraheras*, and other cultural activities, but they face with painful heavy works, harmful training. Large development projects such as construction of dams and reservoirs, roads, sand mining, rock blasting, agricultural plantations and expanding human settlements have also fragmented elephant habitat and endangered for their existence. Farmers occasionally kill elephants to protect their fields and families. Experts believe that these conflicts are now the leading cause of elephant deaths in Asia. In some countries, the government provides compensation for crop damage or deaths caused by elephants, but there is still often strong political pressure on wildlife authorities to eliminate elephants near populated regions rather than to try to avoid conflicts.

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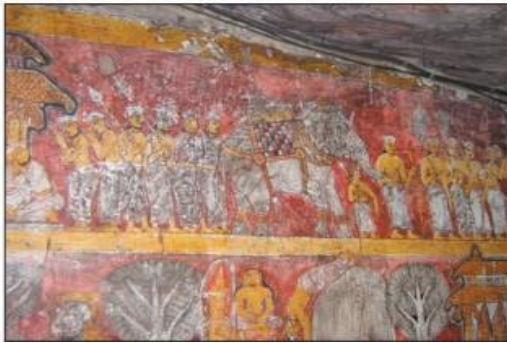


Figure 1 Painting at the ancient Reswehera temple in the Northwest (Fernando et al 2011).



Figure 2. Kandy Esala Perahera, www.Google.lk/search?q=kandy+dalada+perahera



Figure 3. Franz Ferdinand with one of the elephants he killed in Kalawela, Ceylon, in January 1893. source: imagesofceylon.com



Figure 4. *Peramunarala* carries an ola leaf book wrapped in a piece of white cloth.



Figure 5. The *Gajanayake Nilame*, who wielding a goad rides on an elephant next.



Figure 6. The Majestic Maligawe Etha carrying the casket of the sacred tooth relic.



Figure 7. Diyawadana Nilame with the Sri Dalada Maligawa elephants Raja, Skanda, Jaya Raja & a few more



Figure 8. Elephant Orphanage in Pinnawala



Figure 9. The elephant gently pushes the log into position on the lorry deck (FAO 1999).



Figure 10. Elephant Dance at National Zoo, Dehiwala.



Figure 11. Foreign tourist rides an elephant during a sightseeing tour in the ancient city of Sigiriya.



Figure 12. An elephant died by the collision with trains.