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Talking Elephants into Slavery

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The vocabularies used to describe temple elephants in Kerala as majestic and sacred animals erase their natural histories and the brutality of their enslavement.

Most people in Kerala know that the captive elephants who are put to work during *pooram*, the temple festival season, lead lives of intense suffering. Making them stand with their soft-padded feet on tarred roads for hours in the sun, subjected to sharp blows of the *ankush* (bullhook), and being chained for months during *musth* are highly visible problems that are also registered as such in the public mind. This understanding and discomfort seldom translate into a call for action – instead, they weaken within a larger environment saturated with heartwarming stories of the elephant-mahout relationship and with narratives of the need for preserving tradition, and claims of the centrality of elephants to Kerala’s society and culture.

Reports of extreme cruelty documented by activists and photographers like V.K. Venkitachalam and N.A. Naseer do garner wide support for abolishing the practice and business of parading captive elephants. However, the questions around welfare and treatment that evidence of extreme cruelty raises are quickly dismissed with promises of improvement in their living conditions. Techniques like leaving wounds to fester with the chains sinking into their flesh, stuffing cloth and broken glass into the deep slashes on elephants’ legs made by the mahout’s machete, masking these open wounds with ash, tapping on them at the hint of resistance and pouring boiling water into their mouths and starving them into obedience, all get labelled as isolated incidents or the doings of a few sadistic mahouts. In a relationship predisposed to violence these hardly come as a surprise.

There are, however, other basic questions – *How did the elephants end up here? Where were they born? What would they rather do?* – which have more drastic consequences for the temple elephant industry. They are rendered unthinkable and indefinitely deferred by a language that imagines elephants only as charismatic beings content with their enslavement. Mainstream Malayalam media, and the objectifying language that it keeps in currency to speak about captive elephants, sustain an impression that Kerala’s elephants live lives of care, even as – as Dinesh Wadiwel puts it – their corpses pile up around us.

Making elephants

To illustrate, the corresponding word for ‘captive elephant’ in standardised Malayalam is *naatana* (literally, elephant of the country). To see a chained elephant as an elephant of the country is to erase all traces of captivity from its status (‘country’ here being *naad* – a place of civilization – as separate from *kaad*, or forest). A *naatana* cannot be seen or thought of as being held captive against his interests. The word forces an almost species differentiation of elephants into *naatana* and *kaatana* (or elephant of the forest). This enacts a forgetting that all elephants of the country were originally captured from the wild and brought for labour in captivity. The forgetting is so thorough that it is not uncommon to hear some say that country elephants are born into captivity – which explains the supposed contentment with their condition – in the same breath as they say chains, weapons, and regular cycles of *subjugation* are necessary to keep elephants tame. Captivity denies subjects their mobility, self-determination, and autonomy in forming their own communities and finding belonging.

The identification of elephants with the country in *naatana* ensures that any attempt to rehabilitate captive elephants in forest fringes will be construed as an attack on the country’s identity and native traditions.

Hiding the fact of captivity hence accomplishes a naturalisation of elephants’ belonging in and properness to the country, suggesting the elephant’s own choice to be here – a *naatana* has no reason for resisting or wanting something other than captivity. Just as the elephant is ‘seen’ as finding themselves at home in the country, the *naatana* concept also allows the country to assert that the elephant belongs to them, thereby necessitating their continued enslavement. The identification of elephants with the country in *naatana* ensures that any attempt to rehabilitate captive elephants in forest fringes will be construed as an attack on the country’s identity and native traditions.

Illusions of belonging are regularly broken by elephants themselves when they resist and change the conditions of their captivity. *Idanju* (literally, rebelled or opposed), the Malayalam word used to describe elephants breaking away from the mahouts’ control,

encompasses all acts of resistance to which an elephant resorts — from disobeying commands and sudden movements that lead to mild tensions, to throwing off temple workers from their backs, attacking mahouts, and frantically running around. Despite there being as many incidents of elephants rebelling as there are *poorams* in Kerala, few attempt to read them as caused by systems of elephant enslavement and the ideas that underpin it.

Malayalam media aids inaction around this crisis with a reporting style that discounts elephant resistance, portraying them as unremarkable, banal events by withholding important details. The report in a major daily of an elephant named Ootoli Ananthan going out of control during a festival last January is exemplary here. Ananthan is only said to have *idanju*, with no further details about what exactly the elephant did in resistance. This fulfils several functions at once: by keeping a complete picture of the incident in the dark, the report invokes the whole range of what a rebelling elephant can do — misbehaviour, triggering stampedes, killing, destruction, all effectively recast as probabilities by means of the vagueness of the word *idanju*. It reduces the chain of events that transpired on the festival grounds, including factors like the elephant’s health, presence of any stressors, behaviour of mahouts and the public, to the moment of the rebellion itself. This both silences the elephant’s voice and experience in the narrative, and betrays the heavy investment in keeping the elephant under control.

The use of the word *idanju* in the report sets up an artificial switch whereby the elephant is *either* under constant control and surveillance *or* he has gone wild and is murderous. Counter-violence of any magnitude thereby becomes permissible to subdue him, his rights of protection against cruelty notwithstanding — it is not cruelty if it is (constructed as) necessary. Ananthan was literally brought to his knees by the elephant squad, a specialised team summoned in cases of unruly behaviour who come armed with bullhooks, tranquilliser guns, ropes, and chains. (Is this a festival, wonders N.A. Naseer, or is this war?) By eliding details of the cause and manner of resistance, reportage such as this diverts the public’s attention from questions about the elephant’s condition and whether the violence used on him was proportionate, by allaying their concern with an assurance that there was no destruction of human life and property.

Objectification and enslavement

Malayalam has a separate vocabulary to speak about captive elephants, a fact seemingly indicative of the special consideration that they enjoy in the state. Media reportage borrows from this repository to fill their stories with an unchanging set of high-sounding words — *thalayidupp* (height of the head from the ground), *proudi* (majesty), *lakshanamotha* (well-proportioned) — which deny any insight into the elephant’s interiority, experience, and interests.

Seeing elephants as performing *pooram* rituals on their own erases the work of owners, organisers, and mahouts in manipulating their bodies to produce the desired effects.

Against the background of captivity, the same language — preoccupied as it is with elephant beauty, or *aanachantham* — is immediately revealed to be objectifying. The report of the death of an elephant, Mangalamkunnu Karnan, for example, reduces him into a flurry of excited descriptions of his posture and his rear’s conspicuousness. The gaze behind such language fragments the elephant’s body into an assortment of parts, each of which are evaluated by standards that mean nothing to the elephant.

Situated in, enabled by, and reinforcing conditions of enslavement, this fragmentation and consumption of elephant bodies rehearse the denial of the natural role of their trunks, gestures, and calls in forming relationships within their herd. Uprooted from their families and forest homes and secured by chains — a toy that we can move at will — the prohibition on their complex sociality is essential to their successful and uneventful captivity. Enslavement arrests an elephant’s autonomous experience over their own body that is turned against them (when chained during *musth*, for example) and alienated from themselves. They are prevented from acting on the pull of the rich intergenerational culture and memory that have produced them. They are rendered into objects through enslavement and a language structured by and founding that very enslavement.

This founding objectification depends on turning elephants into mere props to hold up the deity in *poorams* and on a careful erasure of the history of punishment, subjugation, and torturous training that make an appreciation of *aanachantham* (beauty) possible in the first place. An elephant tethered in temple premises will invariably have a long metal staff balanced against his shoulder behind his ear. It represents to him the range of small movements and degrees of freedom that he is allowed, a proxy mahout. It also reifies to him the memory and experience of pain from a training regimen that viscerally yokes an event of the staff falling with a bullhook *dug* into his knee. To the *aanachantham* enthusiasts, it represents the elephant now made approachable enough (or broken into approachability) for them to confront him in the *pooram*, surrounded by the same objects — torches, noise, firecrackers — that are used to scare away

wild elephants wandering into villages, and produce a discourse that sees and makes seeable only the elegant curvature of the elephant’s tusks.

It would be untrue to say that captive elephants in media reports are mindless, insensate robots. They are commonly described as acting in the first person, like [the elephants at Malayalapuzha Pooram](#) who came to the temple, bowed to the goddess, and then stood in line lifting their heads to see who was the tallest. Such a style of reporting that apparently sees captive elephants as agential and responding animals only continues the tendency to obscure enslavement and its apparatuses. Seeing elephants as performing *pooram* rituals on their own erases the work of owners, organisers, and mahouts in manipulating their bodies to produce the desired effects.

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The *strangeness* of large and powerful animals obeying commands from humans is allayed within a rhetorical envelope of infantilisation. Captive elephants are made to seem like giant children – the source of the hallmark fuzziness in most trainer-large animal stories – who offer no resistance to what we require of them or to our assumptions of what is best for them. Their interests are always the same as those of the mahouts and the festival-goers. We transform them into a blank space onto which we project an elephant agency and cognition of our own making; we create a narrative and doctor a scene whereby they themselves seem to recognise the significance of their enslaved labour and volunteer willingly.

Dying three ways, grieving two

The deception in hiding the suffering of elephants is nowhere as stark as in reports of temple elephant deaths. There are two equivalents for the verb ‘died’ in Malayalam – *marichu* and *chatthu*. Each designates a distinct manner of dying and the appropriate weight and grief owed to the dead. While both describe the animal process of life ending, *marichu* is strictly reserved for humans and *chatthu* for animals, except when humans die like animals.

To say an animal died with *marichu* is to give undue significance to the death of a mere animal. It can be justified only with a personal connection with the dead animal, who was most likely a pet.

Neither *marichu* nor *chatthu* is applicable for elephants. An elephant who has died is said to have *charinju*, which literally means to slant and fall. As far as captive elephants are concerned, it belongs to the same euphemistic species as ‘pass over to the other side’, in partially conveying the extinguishment of life. *Charinju* extends the elephant’s nobility and majesty to his experience and event of death.

Charinju further obliterates the fact that an elephant, fixed as he is in majesty, is an animal with a body that can be wounded until it dissolves.

Kuzhur Swaminathan, a 60-year-old elephant, was one of the 29 temple elephants who [died](#) in the state last year. He died with little grace. [Activists](#) had gathered footage prior to his death highlighting his deteriorating health and the criminal negligence in his care. He had been struck blind and kept chained to the same spot for months at a stretch. His mahouts, who had a tussle with the owner, had left him to starve in the sun. Yet mainstream media, which [reported](#) that Swaminathan had died/ *charinju*, was silent on the activist findings. Using *charinju* for Swami, emaciated and abandoned as he was to disease and trauma, instead of the more truthful *chatthu* imposes a false dignity on a death that was lacking any. It asserts that the elephant died in a manner appropriate to the nobility of his stature regardless of the circumstances of death which it actively shrouds.

The special place of elephants in Kerala’s culture, the human names, addresses, and identity conferred on them and, finally, their deaths seemingly after a full life, their funeral and statues are all impressions of privilege that are marshalled to preclude even the imaginability of such an elephant dying in wretchedness and pain. Describing death by *charinju* hence also censors any gaze that isolates Swami’s ‘natural’ death as suspicious; it obviates collective sentiment and action to investigate and change the conditions that allowed such a death. *Charinju* further obliterates the fact that an elephant, fixed as he is in majesty, is an animal with a body that can be wounded until it dissolves.

Hiding facts of suffering behind the stateliness of *charinju* is complemented by other forms of deception in the content of reports on temple elephant deaths. The [report on Swami’s death](#) leaves the controversy around his condition unmentioned and focuses instead on

a history of his life, given as a list of the temples he has laboured for. There is little about his life outside the temple grounds and the *pooram* season – the periods of musth, the punishment-enforced training, his sale from person to person, are aspects that are excluded to give an impression that he emerged from his birthplace in Bihar to fulfil his destiny of working at temples. He is shown as indistinguishable from the temple. The less glamorous, bodily afflictions that elephants endure in captivity are consigned to murky spaces and shielded from public knowledge.

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Despite framing them as grievable, this style of reporting elephant deaths also naturalises and banalises suffering as an unremarkable and inevitable part of captive elephants’ lives. It cultivates an economy of attention in which the media decides where to focus public concern – not in the circumstances of death that could jeopardise the temple elephant industry, but on the uncracked images of animals who have majesty thrust upon them in life and death.

A basic grammatical inquiry into *charinju* reveals how the doer of the act of dying can only be the elephant himself. Unlike humans who die but can also be killed, *charinju* shuns the possibility that a captive elephant can be made dead. Even when the elephant has been tortured to death, *charinju* establishes that the elephant ‘has died’ – a stand-alone incident unfolding from causes natural to elephants. *Charinju* leaves no scope for a second person who acts on the elephant and causes him to die, for that would count as a separate event which coincides with the main, elephant-specific factor like illness or heart-attack that is the real cause of death. In other words, one cannot kill a captive elephant; he always dies on his own.

This is evident in a report on the Thirunakkara Pooram that gives a list of the elephants who have carried the presiding deity. The most beloved of them, Kochukomban, is said to ‘have died, receiving blows from his own mahouts’ (*paapanmaarudethanne mardanamettu charinju*). *Kolluka*, the Malayalam word for ‘kill’, is in fact applicable to humans and animals alike but not for elephants. Only elephants can kill mahouts (*aana paapane konnu*) in standard media usage; *charinju* makes it impossible that mahouts can kill the elephant. The mahouts, owners, and *pooram* organisers can at most be blamed for cruelty. Blame for death attaches neither to individuals nor structures; *charinju* just dissipates it.

The temple elephant industry relies on this delicate balance struck by Malayalam media that at once exceptionalises elephants and separates them from the faceless mass of other animals, yet allows them to be objectified, enslaved, and finally die behind the screen of precisely this privileged status – a balance that at once allows an outpouring of grief at their deaths, yet frames their deaths in and by slavery as so ordinary not to be killings at all.

Sacredness as basis

The temple complex – which is to say, the temple and its grounding discourses – pre-establishes elephants as sacred to Kerala’s Hindu practice through the formulation of *pooram* and other ceremonies that can be complete only with their participation. The work of sacralisation is also the work of enslavement. Considering elephants as sacred involves a separation of elephants from other animals who continue to be mundane, and of some elephants from others who continue to be wild (*kaatana*). This discursive separation that exceptionalises elephants as sacred sets the groundwork for an actual separation of elephants from their herds, their trapping and captivity in training camps. They are broken in *kraals* and converted into chattel that is eventually traded into Kerala. They are co-opted into the Hindu fold, given Hindu names, and made to perform ritualistic labour.

The captive elephant is constructed as always already of the Hindu fold, the temple becomes his rightful abode as someone dedicated to the deity.

Sacredness by necessarily enslaving elephants transforms them into objects that can be moved and managed according to religious mandates. This unrelenting management that keeps the shackled elephant in line continues the work of manufacturing an aura of sacredness about him. The elephant in a *pooram* comes across as an ideal devotee, participating in and offering his worship to the lord whom he recognises as his own. The appearance of devotion, produced by threats and the inflicting of violence in *pooram* grounds, is reproduced in *pooram* reportage as well.

Framing elephant labour in temples in this way invalidates the fact that any of these rituals are imposed on the elephant. He emerges as a responding, reciprocating participant who himself realises the value of the rituals, understands his place, and willingly performs his

duty in the *pooram*. He offers his due share of service, *seva*, as a devotee of the deity. A sense of involvement that is projected on the sacred, enslaved person of the temple elephant normalises the place and belongingness of elephants in the temple. By manipulating and misinterpreting his body to make his worship and enjoyment in the *pooram* obvious, and by effacing the elephant's resistance and the systems of control and punishment that hold up illusions of elephant consent, the captive elephant is constructed as always already of the Hindu fold, the temple becomes his rightful abode as someone dedicated to the deity.

To work for the temple becomes any elephant's predestined, natural purpose in life as a Hindu sacred animal, because wild elephants are simply reservoirs to replenish captive country elephant populations. Accordingly, we see accounts where elephants arrive from forests to the country, seemingly cognisant of their destiny and sacredness, to take up their post at temples a literal *ghar wapsi*. Normalising the presence of elephants in temples is also dependent on the erasure of their forest origins. The elephant is portrayed as one with the temple; it is where his history starts.

Sacralisation, enslavement, and objectification are co-constitutive, mutually reinforcing effects of power over elephants; one always brings and builds on the other. The statement *the elephant is considered a sacred animal*, I have tried to show, is a production of and precondition for considering oneself the rightful owners of elephants, invading into their families and territory, enslaving and holding them in constant dread of punishment's coming, burdening them to themselves and beating their animal body that *passes urine in terror* into worshipable majesty.

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