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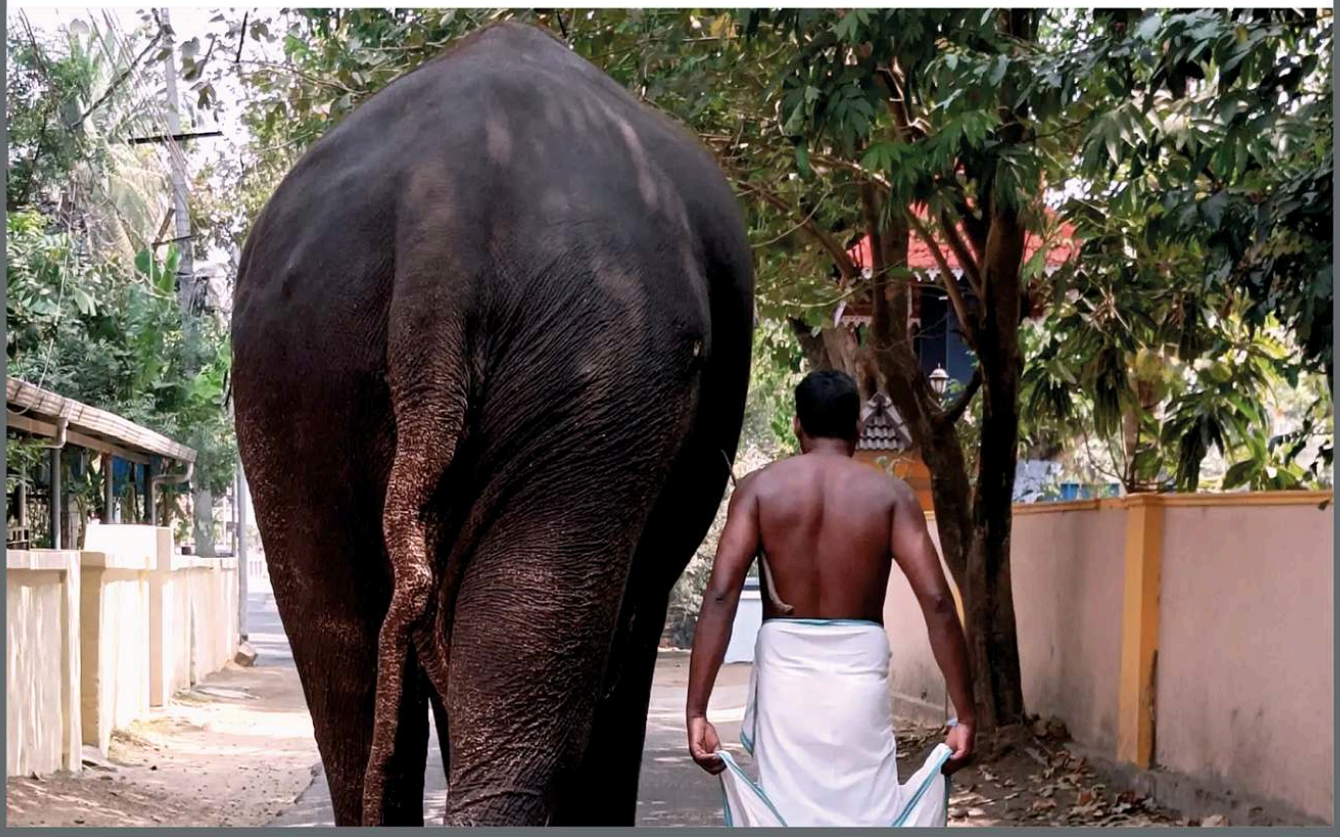

Back Then It Was Culture, Now It Is Animal Torture

Moral-Phenomenological Milieu of Human-Elephant Entanglements in Kerala

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ABSTRACT

Interrogating responses and reactions and the atmosphere of fear that my presence instigated, this paper critically examines human-elephant relations in Kerala amidst the bigger debates on animal rights, the emergence of elephants as a flagship species of conservation, and concerns regarding elephant captivity. The paper delves into how elephant handlers and owners reposition themselves and respond to activistic claims that portray human-elephant relations as torturous. Further, the study calls into question the strict nature-culture/wild-domesticated binaries posed by the activism discourse by probing the fuzzy naturecultures through which elephants and humans navigate their mundane lives. Moving forward, the research proposes that humans and elephants are attuned and entangled through nuanced phenomenological alignments that the normative moral frameworks on elephant captivity seem to overlook. Deploying various disciplinary and theoretical frameworks, this paper argues that incorporating the ethical turn in anthropology can yield incisive perspectives in interspecies studies.

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ANU KARIPPAL

Anu Karippal holds a master's degree in Anthropology and Sociology from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID). Her dissertation 'Back Then It Was Culture, Now It Is Animal Torture: Moral-Phenomenological Milieu of Human-Elephant Entanglements in Kerala' was awarded the 2022 Anthropology and Sociology Department prize. She is currently studying for a PhD in Linguistic Anthropology at the University of Virginia where she is working on questions of human-elephant communication, theory of mind, and animal personhood.

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

> 'One does not have to be a great seer to predict that the relationship between humans and nature will, in all probability, be the most important question of the present century.' – Philippe Descola, *The Ecology of Others*, 2013, p. 81.

1 Growing up in the biodiverse Western ghats,[1] I was drawn into the life of nonhumans as a child, whether it was walking around sitting on our goat or being chased by street dogs on the way to Sunday church service. If you left the door open, a monkey was sure to grab everything in your fridge. Crows were uninvited yet desirable guests who graciously cleaned up the food waste thrown into the backyard; they were also understood to warn the household about the arrival of unexpected guests with a distinct caw that women who mostly use the kitchen space and hence share more time with crows claim to identify. These vibrant forms of interspecies relations are wrapped in vocabularies of love, fear, disgust and admiration. Less spoken about in these interspecies relations are the Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus)*, popular for their majestic attribution, intelligence and social bonding (Poole and Moss, 2008). As elephants are not domesticated biologically through selective breeding[2] (Riddle and Stremme, 2011; Munster, 2014) but socially through taming practices, human-elephant relations are not as common as other companion-species relations. Yet, elephants are central to the public life of Kerala, so much so that it would be considered an insult if one had grown up in Kerala and was unaware of the popular Thrissur *pooram*[3], the annual temple festival pageantry held in the Thrissur state of Kerala where many caparisoned elephants are paraded, making it a much-awaited sight.

2 Despite the domestication constraints, Asian elephants and humans have been intimately bonded for a very long time, bound up with humans as war elephants, as divine beings, as labourers under the East India Company, and now as a flagship species of conservation in South Asia and as celebrities in contemporary social media (Menon, 1911; Sukumar, 2003; Locke, 2013; Vijayakrishnan and Sinha, 2019). An integral part of this relation is the human veneration of elephants as symbolic of the elephant-headed Hindu deity Ganesha that is manifest in the central role of elephants in religious ceremonies and temple celebrations (Radhakrishna and Sinha, 2010). While elephants form matriarchal groups in the wild and their social bonding is subject to scholarly

attention (Vidhya and Sukumar, 2005), male elephants are preferred in the domestic sphere as they are considered to be aesthetically pleasing for pageantries, tusk being a desirable feature that distinguishes Asian male elephants from females (Vijayakrishnan and Sinha, 2019). Moreover, as elephant ownership was prominent among the landed gentry, given the huge expenses involved in rearing elephants, the best tuskers came to represent a family's prestige (Vijayakrishnan and Sinha, 2019). The process of domestication[4] and the ability to manage an elephant is considered an extraordinary achievement and the interspecies connection between mahouts[5] and their elephants is interpreted as one of the strongest possible human-animal bonds (Hart and Sundar, 2000).

3 However, such domestication practices are not without their pitfalls. Elephant domestication involves a system of punishment and rewards in confinement that has increasingly come under the radar of the recent debates on animal rights discourse and growing studies on elephant intelligence (Poole and Moss, 2008; Birch, 2022), all of which inquire into the ethicality of elephant captivity (Kulick, 2017). The global recognition of animal rights and species extinction has enabled the emergence of elephants as a flagship species of wilderness and conservation, whereby, as Mann Barua recounts, elephants have become cosmopolitan figures (Barua, 2014). Growing perceptions of the 'wildness' of elephants and attention on contested taming practices have not only shaped strict wildlife management policies such as the illegalisation of further capture and sale of elephants in India since 2002,[6] but have led to the scrutinisation of human-elephant relations. This probing of quotidian human-elephant relations had created a tenor of fear among my informants; a fear of the legal apparatus and of the activistic/journalistic depictions of human-elephant relations which, according to my informants, were 'partial' and 'non-grounded', portraying the bond as a relation of violence and suffering. The sense of fear was palpable, where my own presence (being a student from an international institute) was interpreted as potentially causing 'trouble', and was treated with caution from the first day, as though 'I' reactivated a certain response to the larger entity they felt they need to respond to. In conceptualising the inextricable links between humans and nonhumans, Donna Haraway writes that '[i]n urgent times, many of us are tempted to address trouble in terms of making an imagined future safe, of stopping something from happening that looms in the future.... Staying with the trouble does not require such a relationship to times called the future. In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present...'. In following Haraway's proposition to stay with the trouble, my informants' worry over what I would write about them opened a path to stay with the 'trouble' that my presence instigated (Haraway, 2016), to further unpack the moral-sensorial dimensions of human-elephant entanglements in the midst of big debates.

4 Throughout this paper, I examine this atmosphere of fear among my informants to unpack the animal rights discourse (although many of my informants were unaware of the specificities of the discourse but experienced it through changing rules and scrutinisation) and look at how they respond and re-orient to the competing moral perceptions about elephants, such as the portrayal of the human-elephant relation as torturous or regarding whether the elephant must 'roam freely' in the wild or live with humans. I further show that the notion of elephants as beings destined to be in the wild does not engage with the historically and culturally embedded relationships that Asian elephants share with humans, where nature/culture, wild/domesticated binaries seem to diffuse. Thereafter, I propose that studying human-elephant relations

comprehensively requires redirecting focus on the local sensorial and moral realms that permeate the human-elephant entanglements, prompting alternate ways of perceiving interspecies relations beyond the defines of torture and moral totalities. In current times where the elephant has become a cosmopolitan figure for conservation and nonhuman intelligence, it is both academically and politically significant to engage with these debates through an ethnographic approach and explore the possible perspectives on human-elephant relations that ethnography can offer.

Theoretical framework

5 Using different theoretical approaches within anthropology and from other disciplines was crucial to unpacking the human-elephant relations in Kerala. First, this paper builds on and contributes to the exciting work on interspecies relations in anthropology. With the more-than-human turn in anthropology and the attention to nonhuman agency in Latour's actor-network theory (2005), scholars have challenged the long-held notion of human exceptionalism, bringing out the complexities of a shared world and questioning the 'human exploiter-nonhuman exploited' binary (Pollen, 2001; Ingold, 2007; Kohn, 2007; Fuentes, 2013; Govindrajan, 2015; Mathur, 2021). Much before that, Marylin Strathern (1980) brought out the tensions between the strict binaries of nature and culture when she wrote that the nature/culture distinction is itself a product of culture. Building on this, scholars such as Donna Haraway (2003) in looking at human-dog relations and Agustin Fuentes (2010) in studying human-macaque entanglements suggest naturecultures as a continuum, enlightening us in the inseparability of ecological relationships from the social. Anthropologist Piers Locke who has worked extensively on human-elephant relations draws historical manuals in India to suggest that the human hand is not insignificant in shaping the ranging behaviour of elephants we call 'wild' and 'free-roaming' (Locke, 2016). Although scholars have demystified the idea of 'pristine nature' in academia, such ideas continue to dominate the popular discourse that drives conservation efforts and makes elephants a cosmopolitan category as Barua (2014) notes. Donna Haraway highlights this wild-domesticated tension when she refers to how the trainers of 'so-called wild animals' in captivity are accused of introducing non-naturalistic behaviours (Haraway, 2008). These criticisms by the 'radical animal people', as Haraway calls them, are further examined by Indian scholars who argue that the hegemonical ideals of conservation from Western or elite Indian perspectives affect the subaltern communities[7] of post-colonial India that live proximately with other species (Guha, 1989; Rangarajan, 1996; Guha, 2006). Elaborating on the aforementioned literature and fieldnotes, I show that such cosmopolitanism strips elephants of their local specificities and cultural embeddedness with humans.

6 Phenomenologically inspired relational approaches in ecological psychology and animal studies were equally important (Gibson, 1977; Ingold, 2007; Lorimer et al., 2017; Mondeme, 2018; Ford, 2019) in configuring a renewed mode of looking at the ways humans and nonhumans communicate, highlighting the role of the senses in shaping interactions. Ecological psychology recognises the role of the environment in the development of a being (Costall, 2001; Ingold, 2007). Gibson's theory of affordances suggests that every being interacts with the world, modifying it and it modifying the being (Gibson, 1977), thus elaborating on the situatedness and intersubjectivity of

human-nonhuman realms (Csordas, 1994). Drawing insights from this, I probe into the cultural dimensions of the elephants popularly categorised as 'natural' and 'wild' to posit that the human-elephant interface operates at nature-culture continuums.

7 Within the interspecies turn in anthropology and other disciplines, studies that reflect on ethics are primarily addressed through compelling takes such as kinship, the sensorial, perspectivism, the moral relevance of animal intelligence, etc., (Singer, 1990; Kohn, 2007; Dave, 2014; Govindrajan, 2015; Singh and Dave, 2015; Kulick, 2017; Mathur, 2021; Birch, 2022; Wall and Andrews, 2022). Haraway touches upon the moral totalities that drive activistic convictions about domestication when she, following Hearne (2007), argues that training animals is not just about simple domination but a rich and subtle conversation between the animal and the trainer (Haraway, 2008). While Haraway and Hearne make stimulating critiques of such views on domestication and reveal the nuanced affect and affection in companion species relations, analysing the rich and subtle conversations between humans and elephants in Palakkad amidst the ethical questioning of elephant captivity required that I go beyond the existing approaches in interspecies studies and engage with phenomenological approaches to moral experience. I therefore propose that incorporating concepts from the anthropology of ethics and morality—particularly moral assemblage, moral breakdown, sentiments, and attunement (Throop, 2012; Zigon, 2014)—can add a perceptive element to interspecies studies.

8 The ethical turn in anthropology reoriented how scholars investigated moral experience that was primarily the terrain of philosophers, offering a pragmatic approach to moral and ethical sensibilities through ethnographic attention (Fassin, 2008; Lambek, 2010; Zigon, 2010; Das, 2012; Robbins, 2012). They advocate for new conceptual tools that probe the anthropologist's and others' moral commitments, proposing to interrogate what counts as morality in the various social worlds we and our interlocutors inhabit and the processes through which such moral modalities come to matter (Fassin, 2008; Stoczkowski, 2008; Zigon, 2010). This approach, distinct from considering morality as a normative given, redirects the gaze to the everyday forms of being and living. There is quite a debate among scholars as to where to locate the ethical. Scholars such as Veena Das locate the ethical in the everyday, where a descent into the ordinary is not just a taken-for-granted state of moral affairs but where people cultivate critical attitudes to re-orient oneself (Das, 2012). However, the scholars who distinguish ethics from morality, such as Zigon, warn us how the everydayness of the ethical can make it difficult to distinguish morality/ethics from normative social behaviour, proposing that morality and ethics need to be made explicit as conceptual tools (Zigon, 2010).[8]

9 Zigon uses the concept of moral and ethical assemblage, which he identifies in three fields, the institutional, public discourse, and embodied dispositions. Institutions are formal and non-formal social organisations, and the public discourse consists of media, protest, everyday articulated beliefs and opinions, the arts, etc., and the two fields of morality, although distinct, are in constant dialogue (Zigon, 2010). The third, embodied dispositions, is the unreflective, familiar, and taken-for-granted temperaments of everyday social life which, for Zigon, puts people in a state of existential comfort. Zigon distinguishes ethics from such embodied dispositions as the conscious reflection or the turning of one's attention inward, where people step out and question taken-for-granted moral engagements with the world, what he describes as 'moral breakdown'

(Zigon, 2007) leading to heightened moments of self-reflection and transformation of moral lives. Zigon's notion of 'moral breakdown' is a compelling theoretical tool to situate the embodied moral dispositions of fear among my informants that had emerged out of the competing moral discourses regarding elephant captivity and the changing legal apparatus. This approach to morality and ethics is experiential, or for a better word, phenomenological, where we find ourselves in complex relations with other beings and the ethical demands that these relations bring. For my informants who engage in complex relations with elephants, it is the phenomenological nuances of the relation and the attunement with their individual elephants that shaped their moral temperaments (Throop, 2012). This emphasis on the sensorial and moral realms of relation is best explained conceptually by employing concepts of attunement, assemblage, and sentiments to the domain of interspecies, as they provide a nuanced framework to interspecies ethics where senses, sentiments and being attuned shape the fuzzy moral milieu of human-elephant sociality (Throop, 2012; Zigon and Throop, 2014).

10 This research makes two theoretical contributions. First, by putting the anthropology of ethics and morality to test in the study of interspecies assemblages,[9] I show that incorporating different theoretical frameworks opens enriching perspectives towards the human-elephant realm, one that is overlooked by the activistic-moral discourse on elephant captivity. Thus, I propose that the ethical turn in anthropology can be a productive approach to delineating the interspecies field, especially when animal care has become a politically and morally contested issue in contemporary times. Second, this research contributes to the relatively understudied realm of human-elephant sociality. Although much is known about the behavioural ecology of wild elephants and the cultural and historic significance of captive elephants, very little has been done on studying the nuances of interspecies relationships (Lorimer, 2010), perhaps also because of the rarity of human-elephant proximate relations at an extensive scale. Piers Locke's conceptualisation of ethnoelephantology—the study of the sociocultural intersections of humans and elephants—is a first in this approach, but as he too points out, this is an emerging thematic interest in anthropology where much remains to be explored (Locke, 2013). In addition to the growing biological knowledge of elephants and the historical-cultural embeddedness of human-elephant entanglement, this paper makes significant contributions in providing a grounded, moral-phenomenological perspective to human-elephant relations in South Asia.

Mapping the Chapters

11 In the first chapter, I will unpack the 'trouble' that my informants feared my presence would cause. Grounded in my informants' initial conceptions of me as a 'person from channel' (a phrase my informants used to refer to journalists) or as a person from the 'animal protection department', I depict my informants' reactions and re-orientations to the everyday surveillance of the human-elephant relations and complicate the fear of activistic/journalistic narratives. The second chapter challenges the strict nature-culture binaries by invoking the sociocultural attributions to elephants and explores how projected 'wildness' puts an emphasis on the moral value humans place on elephants. In the third chapter, I build on extensive ethnographic fieldnotes to analyse the moral and sensorial intricacies that shape the attuned relationship between

elephants and humans, going beyond the popular narrative of the said relation as torturous.

FOOTNOTES

1. UNESCO World Heritage Convention, *Western Ghats*, https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1342/ (accessed on 21 February 2023).

2. Due to the limited success of the cross-breeding of elephants in domestic settings and artificial insemination (See Brown, Janine L., et.al. "Successful artificial insemination of an Asian elephant at the National Zoological Park." *Zoo Biology* 23 (2004): 45-63)

3. Kerala Tourism, *Thrissur Pooram*, https://www.keralatourism.org/event/thirssur-pooram/7 (accessed on 8 March 2023).

4. Wild elephants, especially calves, were caught in the forests using *vaarikuzhi* (pits to trap elephants) and further tamed in elephant camps.

5. A skilled human handler of the elephant, usually a male.

6. Wildlife SOS, *Indian Laws Protecting Elephants*, https://wildlifesos.org/elephant/indian-laws-protecting-elephants/ (Accessed on 8 March 2023) - elephant trapping is illegal except in human-elephant conflict situations.

7. Although most mahouts belong to the lower economic/social strata of society and fall into the "subaltern" category, the owners belong to upper class-caste (which also indicates their economic ability to afford elephants). However, neither group's views are actively considered in the big discussions on elephants.

8. More about this debate in (Mattingly and Throop, 2018).

9. Although (Singh and Dave, 2015) acknowledge the field of Anthropology of ethics and morality in analysing the ethical realms of killing animals, the article's main approach is through Agamben's 'bare life' and does not engage deeply with the ethics and morality literature.

Methodology and Positionality

Data Collection

1 I conducted fieldwork from 15 January to 19 February 2022 in the Palakkad district of Kerala, a south Indian state. Although other districts in Kerala have a higher proportion of captive elephants, I chose Palakkad because of my acquaintance with a prominent elephant photographer Anoop who is a native of Palakkad. This made it easier to establish contacts with mahouts and elephant owners. From there, the snowball effect worked well, and most of my initial informants invited me to temple festivals and connected me with other informants.

2 Given my research topic 'Moral-Phenomenological Milieu of Human-Elephant Entanglements in Kerala', deep hanging out and creating thick descriptions of the cultural contexts that shaped the interspecies interactions were central to the questions I was asking. My informants claimed the activistic/media portrayal of human-elephant relations to be simplistic and hence an instance of thin description, thereby emphasising the value of thick description in paying attention to the nuanced interpretations of human-elephant interactions (Ryle, 1949; Geertz, 1973). A major part of the fieldwork was with two elephants and their handlers, which not only allowed interviews but short conversations during participant observation. I conducted seven semi-structured interviews, six in-person and one over the phone. All my interviewees except one agreed to be recorded, and the recordings lasted between 40 minutes and two hours. All the interviews were conducted in Malayalam,[1] transcribed into English, and no coding software was used. The names of the informants, elephants, and locations are anonymised. I also attended three temple festivals where I observed elephant-mahout-devotee interactions and visited the Punnathur elephant fort in Kerala[2] where I observed elephant-mahout-tourist interactions. In both the temple and fort visits, I was able to hold short conversations with elephant handlers that were self-narrated and recorded immediately to maintain the nuances of the conversation. Over time, I was permitted to take part in elephant care practices such as feeding and bathing the elephant, thus developing the arts of noticing the subtleties of more-than-human engagement through sensorial participation (Tsing, 2015; Fijn and Kavesh, 2020). This, as one of my informants, mahout Satheeshan suggested, was the best way

to learn – through practice. In suggesting an epistemological point, learning through practice also becomes what Sarah Pink elucidates is a way of doing sensorial ethnography- by thinking about the multisensoriality of the experience, perception, and practice (Pink, 2009).

Fieldwork during the Covid-19

3 Although Covid-19 impeded fieldwork for many researchers,[3] it facilitated my fieldwork (apart from contracting Covid-19 and having to reschedule fieldwork). December-April is usually the festival season in Kerala where mahouts and elephants take part in consecutive temple festivals that would give me limited access, thus restricting the deep hanging out, in-depth interviews, and participatory activities. Due to the Covid-19 third wave that hit India in December-February 2022 and the associated lockdown, group gatherings including temple festivals were prohibited and elephants were in their homes with the mahout. This gave me an ideal situation to conduct this research.

Positionality and Ethical Considerations

4 My primary source of contact, Anoop, and the informants I met through him played an important role in determining the places and people I interacted with. This was linked to my female identity and the concerns regarding my safety which was of particular concern because the public impressions of mahouts are not held in high regard. Mahouts are understood to be heavy drinkers both among my informants and in my hometown, where some attribute such drinking habits to the danger involved in riding and managing elephants. My parents expressed discomfort with my choice of research saying, '*Aanakkar kallukudiyanmarum pennupidiyanmarum aanu'* (elephant-people are drunkards and womanisers), a popular saying in Kerala reflecting this public impression of mahouts. The worry regarding my safety surfaced in several conversations with my informants such as 'she is only the age of my younger daughter, we can't send her alone', 'Palakkad men are usually good, but we still need to be careful while sending our *kutti*[4]' while deliberating who my potential informants could be. Although Anoop did not make an explicit mention, he connected me with people who are considered 'trustworthy' by other informants – Lalita, a female owner of Krishnan the elephant and the temple mahout Satheeshan who was Anoop's trusted friend of many years. A later conversation I had with a researcher-devotee at a temple festival reflected this 'trustworthiness'. As were talking about my research and his love for elephants, the man took a glance left and right and bending forward, said in a hushed voice, 'usually these mahouts, they drink in the evening (gesturing with his thumb up and towards the mouth), but these two (referring to temple mahouts Satheeshan and Jayaraman) can be trusted, I would give you 101 *pavan*[5] of gold if I am wrong'. Besides the female identity, my short stature and childlike face garnered a sense of affection in my informants that was reflected in how they addressed me as 'our *kutti*' and in accompanying me to introduce me to other mahouts. Thus, my female identity and my childlike features played an important role in the way people treated me and in the choice of the mahouts I interacted with, which significantly shaped the path this research has taken.

5 As elephants are predominantly used in Hindu religious festivals to carry temple idols, people who interact with the captive elephants are primarily Hindu. This meant that I had to enter temple premises although I am a Christian. Though there are a few temples in India where people from other religions are not permitted, people from different religions attend their local temple festivals as long as they don't enter the sanctum sanctorum. There was an implicit assumption among my informants that I am a Hindu, probably because of the nose pin and *pottu*[6] I wore which are predominantly used by Hindu communities in Kerala and my generic name that did not declare my religion (such as Elizabeth/Ann). This assumption was evident in two ways – first, there were no queries about my religion except one person at the temple and second, there was a sense of inclusion in their conversations as if I belonged to their community, such as inviting me to eat meals at the temple and sharing the temple *prasad*[7]. While I did not deliberately engage in any practice that confirms this, I did not interrupt their presumptions about my perceived Hindu identity, unless when directly asked about my religion or with people whom I became good friends with that required greater transparency. This was conducive as my research involved visiting temple premises and religious identity significantly shapes everyday social interactions in Kerala and more broadly South Asia, where a subtle sense of otherisation (Dervin, 2015) tends to occur when a person does not belong to the same community. Thus, the external appearance that passed me as a Hindu played an important role in people's attitudes towards me, and their sense of comfort in my presence, my sense of comfort in their presence and the easiness of conversations it facilitated.

6 Both the lack of familiarity with the elephants at the beginning of the research and my interactions with elephants as the research advanced shaped people's interests in sharing information. Some of the informants were surprised that I had come to study captive elephants yet did not know the names of the popular elephants in Kerala, where captive elephants are ascribed celebrity status (Vijayakrishnan and Sinha, 2019). The young apprentice Sriram and a man I met at a temple festival said, '*aiyeeee*,[8] you are in Palakkad and you don't know the names of elephants', hinting at a sense of disappointment. My ignorance of elephants was also ridiculed by the young girls at the 'ladies' hostel' where I stayed during the fieldwork, one girl commenting '*Anu chechi*[9] has come to learn about elephants but hasn't seen one properly'. But my admission of ignorance meant that people were generous in sharing information. Most of my informants were keen on sharing their experiences with elephants and encouraged me to visit popular elephant reserves so that 'I could pick from the best ones'. Over time, I began to understand elephant behaviour which gave me an edge in interviews. For instance, when I visited the elephant fort in Guruvayur, I began the conversation with a mahout by asking 'is that elephant in musth[10]?' upon seeing the gland secretion behind the elephant's eye. Realising that I had some understanding of elephant behaviour, the mahout asked 'do you study elephants?'. I nodded yes and he began to talk more about the elephant, also expressing how tourists are interested only in taking pictures and not in understanding the elephant. Thus, both my initial ignorance and the later understanding facilitated information sharing.

7 Although the research topic is human-elephant relations, only human informants have actively appeared in the methodology and in delineating the positionalities of my identity so far. As we humans cannot fully communicate with nonhuman species or see the world from their viewpoint (Titon, 2021), humans inevitably became more relevant

in questions of positionality. Further, as human-human relations are more socially complicated by gender, religion, social hierarchies etc., it is the relation with humans that is of urgent attention to the human researcher. Although scholars of animal studies have come to see nonhumans as collaborators rather than as research subjects (Kulick, 2017), which is a useful and ethical approach to position the researcher in relation to the nonhuman participants, there were definite distinctions between humans and elephants. While the human informants are aware that I am a researcher and might actively choose what information to share with me, the elephant may or may not be aware of my identity as a researcher and its associated implications, which limited the questions of positionality in an interspecies field. However, the biological processes in elephants shaped the boundaries of fieldwork. During fieldwork, Krishnan elephant in Iritty was in musth. During musth, elephants do not listen to their mahouts and approaches from unfamiliar people are met harshly with actions such as throwing palm branches at the stranger or holding the person by the trunk (and that means you probably won't live to see another sunrise). For this reason, I was told to observe from a distance which restricted my observations of the interactions between Krishnan elephant and the handlers. The other elephant I spent most of my fieldwork with was Shekharan, the temple elephant under the care of mahouts Satheeshan and Jayaraman. Since he was not in musth, I was able to participate in feeding, bathing, etc. and closely observe the interactions.

8 Most importantly, the themes that I explore in this paper emerged from how my presence was interpreted among my informants. When I reached out to the informants, most people categorised me as a journalist/from animal protection and were apprehensive about sharing information. There was an atmosphere of fear, a fear that I would write 'bad' things about the human-elephant bond. It was only when I introduced myself by associating with the photographer Anoop that the informants began to feel comfortable. Although my informants were eventually generous in sharing information, my identity of being a researcher from an international institute in Switzerland shaped what can and cannot be said. As informant Raj, the nephew of elephant owner Lalita told me, 'Even Lalita *mami*[11] would not have told you everything.' As much as they were worried at the beginning that I would cause trouble, they were equally worried that I would get in trouble due to possible interpretations of me as an activist or journalist. I will substantiate this with two examples. In the initial days of the fieldwork, I was introduced to an elephant WhatsApp group by Shankaran, a shopkeeper in Iritty where I usually bought bananas for Krishnan elephant. When I introduced myself in the group using my full name, he said that I could have written 'Anu K' and not the entire name, so that people don't look up my name on web searches and cause trouble or hesitate to share information under the assumption that I am a journalist or an 'animal protector'. In another instance, on my first day with the temple elephant Shekharan, the second mahout Jayaraman instructed me not to take pictures of the elephant as it is a temple elephant and the Devaswom board might enquire if they notice the presence of an unfamiliar person. When I asked Jayaraman if I should inform the Devaswom board about my study plan as the office was only a few metres away and they would eventually notice my presence, he said 'No. If they ask, tell. Don't invite trouble'. On one hand, I could potentially cause *trouble* by writing 'bad' things about my informants. On the other hand, I could get in *trouble* for being mistaken as a journalist or activist. Rather than dismissing this fear among my informants as a limitation, engaging with these questions around 'trouble' and 'fear' positioned this

research to explore how my informants respond to the portrayal of human-elephant relations within the animal rights discourse and the associated changing legal apparatus.

9 It was also through such instances that I learnt to be sensitive to the politics around human-elephant relations and to conduct myself through the local ethics of the place. To give another example, informant Nitheesh (the son of Arjunan elephant's owners) told me not to cause frictions between an owner and his/her mahout or fuel the 'ego' as he put it. 'When some people approach our mahout and say - oh we heard that the owner can manage this elephant without mahout's help - then the mahout might not entertain it. And the mahouts are right, they are the ones who take care of the elephant, so their value should be acknowledged', Nitheesh said, warning me of the consequences my conversations can have on their interpersonal relations. These lessons I picked up along the way helped me to tread a careful path and realise the impact of my presence.

FOOTNOTES

1. The spoken language of Kerala.

2. The elephant camp in Kerala owned by the Devaswom board that houses about 50 captive elephants. Devaswom board is a socio-religious trust appointed by the Government of Kerala to manage temples.

3. Science, *How Covid-19 has transformed fieldwork*, https://www.science.org/content/article/how-covid-19-has-transformed-scientific-fieldwork (accessed on 8 March 2023).

4. Used to address young girls affectionately.

5. Eight grams make one pavan. As gold is a valuable metal that is given great importance by the people of Kerala, it is often used to mark the truthfulness of a statement in everyday conversations.

6. A coloured dot worn primarily by Hindu women in the centre of their forehead.

7. Food given to the devotees as a holy offering.

8. The meaning of the word *aiyeee* varies contextually, here it is used to bring shame to the recipient of the message.

9. Used to address elder females in Malayalam.

10. Mating period and a periodic state of hormonal excitation that can last a few months, during which a male elephant becomes dangerous and unpredictable (Munster, 2014).

11. A Tamil word used to address an elder woman from the Tamil Brahmin community in Palakkad.

Staying with the ‘Trouble’: Reactions to Animal Rights Discourse and Changing Legal Apparatus

Don’t Create Trouble for Us: Being Mistaken as a Journalist/Activist

1 Residing on the banks of river Kaveri is a Tamil Brahmin (upper caste) settlement that migrated to Kerala from Tamil Nadu, a neighbouring state in South India. The Tamil Brahmins have built their niche in Palakkad, distinguishing themselves through architecture, attire, and the Tamil texture in their Malayalam.[1] Each lane in the hamlet ends with a temple and the houses are stacked one after the other, sharing the wall and perhaps the family secrets. The clue to differentiate houses, I learnt, is to look for the *kolam*[2] drawn at the entrance of each house. An art of mathematical precision of dots, lines, and curves, it is done by women early in the morning, their black hair dripping water after a bath. The men apply parallel lines of sacred sandalwood paste on their forehead and the sacred thread falls diagonally from the left shoulder to the right waist on their otherwise bare chests. Some are sitting in front of the house reading a newspaper. Some look at me through the railings of their house as I walk by, detecting the new presence.

2 One can sense the omnipresence of elephants in the elephant sculptures festooning the house gates, in the everyday chitchat inside the tiffin rooms, and in the pendants made of elephant tusk[3] hanging by long golden chains that peep through the partially buttoned shirts or decorate the bare chests of men. Lalita is a lean woman in her late fifties who lives in this settlement. Unlike other women her age who wear a saree or nightie at home, Lalita wears a long skirt and a half-sleeve shirt; an attire worn by working, lower caste women that give them flexibility of movement. At Lalita’s home is the portrait of her dead father - ‘a man who loved all beings’, and two elephant statues

on either side. It was my first day of fieldwork. She talked fondly about her elephant Krishnan, a gift from her father, but her words also imbued fear.

> 'We can't depend on people these days... Some will come in the name of research, but they have other intentions. In today's times, rules and regulations are high (*jasthi*) and so are misunderstandings. It is not that we don't want people to see the elephant, but it shouldn't become trouble for us.'

3 There was apprehension in her words about 'misunderstandings' caused by people who have 'other intentions'. Although this was also an indirect instruction to tread a careful path and not cause 'trouble', she was hinting at a broader tension that had become dominant in the contemporary human-elephant landscape. This tension surfaced in the following days. At the kiosk in Iritty sits Shankaran from whom I usually buy bananas for Krishnan elephant. I could go to other shops, but Shankaran seems like a sweet man, and he always adds a few extra bananas for Krishnan. On hearing about my research, Shankaran suggested that I join the elephant WhatsApp group run by 'elephant-lovers' in Iritty. I was excited as this would give me access to talks about elephants and the schedule of temple festivals. Immediately after he shared my number in the group, he received a call from someone asking if I would cause 'trouble' for them. Shankaran calmed him saying, 'don't worry, she is my relative, she is here for research'. Although I was not his relative, such lies, I learnt, were understood to be normal and acceptable in everyday life as long as it has no terrible consequences. Except, Shankaran was worried if I would really cause terrible consequences. Ending the call, he told me, 'He thinks you are a journalist or something. I trust you, please don't create trouble (*kindamandi)* for me'. I left the kiosk after telling him that I would be careful. Later that day, photographer Anoop connected me with Lalita's nephew, Raj, whom it turned out was on the phone with Shankaran that morning. Raj manages the agency that rents elephant caparisons for temple festivals. Perhaps from the after-effect of the morning WhatsApp situation, he refused my request to record the interview, showing the call log on his phone, 'see how many calls I just received from the forest office. I just want to be careful. We say something, you write something else. Even Lalita *mami* wouldn't have told you everything.' Even on the last day of the fieldwork, as I was giving her sweets, Lalita asked, 'You won't write bad things about us, right?'. Anoop had warned me of this in our pre-fieldwork conversations that people might be hesitant to talk to me, interpreting me as an activist or a journalist. But little did I know that this doubt and fear that I would write something 'bad' would follow me everywhere. What did Lalita mean by 'bad' things and what was the 'trouble' that I could have caused? What do such sentiments suggest of the ethical-political universe that pervades their everyday life with elephants?

4 To unpack these questions, it was important, as Haraway tells, to stay with the 'trouble' (Haraway, 2016). Rappaport, in his lecture 'The Anthropology of Trouble' said that 'if we are to engage the difficulties our own society faces, we need to develop conceptions of what it is that constitutes 'troubles' (Rappaport, 1993). Following Rappaport and Haraway, the subsequent sections will present the nuances of the 'trouble' by grounding it in the contemporary debates in animal rights discourses and how they reshape ethical engagement with animals. I use theoretical frameworks of 'moral breakdown' (Zigon, 2007) and moral and ethical assemblage (Zigon, 2010) to situate the institutional and embodied moral dispositions that had emerged out of the competing moral discourses regarding elephant captivity. For Zigon, ethical engagements are heightened moments of self-reflection when granted moral engagements with the

world are questioned, leading to contestation and transformation of our moral lives. Drawing from Zigon, I show that the institutional reorientation of elephant management and the activistic/media portrayals of the human-elephant relation not only shaped a cautious approach towards new presences such as I, but suggested a contestation of their lives with elephants where my informants felt that their relations with elephants were scrutinised by a larger entity, leading to an emphasis on idioms of care and benign reciprocal relations. While the 'moral breakdown' is conceptualised at an individual, embodied level for Zigon (2007), I argue that it is both embodied and distributed among my informants. Following this, I show how in these larger debates, the elephant becomes a cosmopolitan category of conservation, stripping elephants of their local, historical connections (Guha 2006; Barua 2014), and I go on to further question the 'globality' of animal rights discourse by pointing out that local people also partake in this global production of animal rights discourse, where the global is produced through interactions and intersections (Tsing, 2005). In the last section, I employ some of my informants' dissatisfaction with the current legal apparatus to posit that while activistic portrayals of the human-elephant relations are claimed to be 'misinterpretations', neither is the relation a holistic one, showing that the welfare of elephants and the welfare of human handlers don't necessarily converge.

Animal Rights Discourse: From Narratives of Suffering to Narratives of Intelligence

5 Scholars and activists writing and talking about animal exploitation are not a recent phenomenon (Singer, 1990; Thomas, 1993; Derrida, 2008; Berger, 2009). Moral philosopher Peter Singer's work on the equal status of other species deriving from Bentham's utilitarianism (Singer, 1975) was instrumental in reinvigorating the animal rights movement and the implementation of laws against animal cruelty. John Berger in his book *Why Look at Animals* points to the assumption of human exceptionalism, the associated domination of humans over other species, and the compartmentalisation of animals in zoos as objects to be looked at (Berger, 2009). The concern over elephant domestication and the use of elephants for labour, war and religious purposes is not new either, as reflected in the ancient text on elephant management *Mathangaleela* - 'Forest elephants who dwelt there happily and by the power of fate have been brought to town in bonds, afflicted by harsh, bitter, cruel words, ... by sufferings of mind and body, are quite unable for long to sustain life, when from their own herds they have come into the control of men' (Edgerton, 1931).

6 While the human use of animals for labour has always been in question, the concern regarding other species has become a central way of engaging with the world in current times. The role of scientific advancement in shaping these popular attitudes on animals is profound. Various fields of study such as consciousness studies, evolutionary biology, the multispecies turn in anthropology, etc. are raising questions regarding the notion of personhood and sentience in nonhuman species, casting doubt on human exceptionalism (Arluke, 1994; Kulick, 2017; Nadasdy, 2017; Birch, 2022; Wall and Andrews, 2022). A recently published *New York Times* article mentions that 'humanity seems to be edging toward a radical new accommodation with the animal kingdom' (Wright, 7 Mar. 2022), reflecting on the shifting ethical realms these emerging studies on animal intelligence and personhood configure. These changing perceptions of

animals resulted in the *Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness* (Low, 2012), a manifesto stating that animal consciousness exists on an evolutionary continuum departing from a neither/nor proposition, that received substantial attention in the press and from animal rights activists (Titon, 2021). Shifting from a narrative of suffering, animal rights groups now incorporate an evidence-based approach to address the question of animal pain.

7 Elephants are now understood to be self-conscious social beings that maintain lasting social relationships, make strategic decisions, and mourn their dead (Poole and Moss 2008; Varner 2008). Studies also highlight the significance of pain in captivity where elephants that are caught in the wild and go through physical punishment in confinement display symptoms that are associated with post-traumatic stress disorder in humans (Bradshaw et al. 2005; Clubb et al. 2008). The scientific production of elephant sentience and pain has revitalised the sentiment that elephants do not belong in captivity, expressing concern for their physical and mental health (Clubb and Mason, 2003; Lorimer, 2010), thereby making significant shifts in the legal apparatus regarding elephant welfare. Capturing an elephant is prohibited in India under The Wildlife Protection Act 1972 (Vijayakrishnan and Sinha, 2019) and animal rights activists in India are urging for policy changes that completely ban private ownership of elephants, [45] emphasising a growing understanding that elephants belong in the 'wild'. Consequently, the Kerala Captive Elephant Rules were framed in 2003 to ensure the welfare of elephants and mitigate conflict in captivity (Vijayakrishnan and Sinha, 2019), whereby elephant owners are required to submit medical certificates for elephants before parading and mahouts are not permitted to drink-drive elephants given the human-elephant conflict encounters attributed to drunk-driving, among other reasons.

8 But how did the ethical reorientation at the institutional level reflect in the everyday sentiments of elephant owners and mahouts? While many of these legal changes such as documentation of elephants and medical certificates were welcomed by many informants as being good for the welfare of elephants, the ban on the further capture of elephants and the representation of the human-elephant relation as a violent, torturous process generated a tense debate between animal rights activists and the elephant handlers in Kerala. There is a great deal of friction (Tsing, 2005) between animal welfare organisations and the private elephant owners and mahouts they employ. Jamie Lorimer writes that these frictions are formed around contrasting elephant epistemologies (Lorimer, 2010) and questions regarding where an elephant truly belongs, in forests or with humans. A recent court case in the United States regarding Happy the elephant substantiates how competing elephant epistemologies shape different ethical ways of being with elephants. In an affidavit filed on behalf of Happy the elephant to be moved from the zoo to a sanctuary in the US, the activist employed the scientific studies that 'elephants are complex enough to weigh the challenges they face. They discuss among themselves and make collective decisions. You take all that away and you take away what it means to be an elephant' (Wright, 7 Mar. 2022), suggesting a shift in what it means to be an elephant in the light of new knowledge and how it reshapes the ethical perceptions of human-elephant relationships. Such an epistemology where elephants become elephants only in the wild was, for my informants, not doing justice to the complex human-elephant relations in Kerala.

The Complexity of ‘Trouble’ and Moral Breakdown

9 The complexity of ‘trouble’ and how I was perceived as a potential threat became clearer in further conversations with mahouts and elephant owners, particularly in a telephone interview with Nitheesh. A hesitation to confront controversial issues (especially because his parents’ elephant had killed its second mahout a few years ago) and a suspicious attitude towards me was evident at the start of our conversation and he chose his words carefully, perhaps also owing to his profession as a lawyer. In an effort to help me or avoid controversies or both, he suggested that it is ideal to visit places with several elephants and not Nitheesh’s parents who own a single elephant. When I recounted how a family with several elephants gave excuses when I approached them for a visit despite other mahouts confirming the presence of at least one elephant on their house premises, Nitheesh said,

> ‘See, it could be because of past events where people have written badly about mahouts. Especially when they hear that you are from Switzerland, they might be worried about what you are going to write and where the information goes. Even if the elephant excretes just after the stable is cleaned, journalists do not see that it was cleaned. What they see is that elephants are being forced to stay in unhygienic conditions. That doesn’t feel right because that is not how we treat our elephants.’

10 ‘That doesn’t feel right because that is not how we treat our elephants.’ These words from Nitheesh are a productive space to understand the ‘trouble’ that my informants are hinting at where the journalistic narratives of human-elephant relations are claimed to be different from reality. I was often told not to take pictures of the wounds on the elephant or of the mahout applying medicine to the wound. The wounds, according to my informants, are due to several reasons: when elephants try to break away from the chain in aggression during the musth, when elephants scratch against something, due to accidental fault from the mahouts during festivals, or by mahouts who intentionally hurt elephants. Although the reason behind the wound could be any one of these, my informants were worried about how the images would be interpreted as ‘torture’ if they were circulated. This fear of how the human-elephant relations get interpreted or misinterpreted in the light of changing legal apparatus and animal rights discourse was further evident when Raj said ‘many elephants die in the forest from fighting with each other or other reasons. But if something happens to an elephant by an unintentional mistake from the human hand, we are doomed’. The fear of how the wound or the state of the elephant stable will be ‘misinterpreted’ and the everyday reactions such as ‘don’t take pictures of the wound’ suggested that the changing institutional and public discourse had caused a moral breakdown (Zigon, 2007) that shaped how my informants reorient, rethink and re-represent their lives with elephants. Zigon, in his elaboration of moral and ethical assemblages, explains that the two fields of morality, the institutional and the public discourse (art, media, protest, etc.), although separate are in constant dialogue with each other while the third field, embodied dispositions, are the everyday unquestioned forms of moral engagement (Zigon, 2010). But, as my informants express, all three fields – the institutional (legal apparatus), the public discourse (animal rights discourse, journalism, media), and the embodied dispositions (informants’ engagement with elephants) are in constant conversation with each other, where the shifts in the institutional and public discourse spill over to embodied dispositions, causing moral breakdown.

11 For Anoop, these 'misinterpretations' regarding captivity were interwoven in digitally mediated contemporary life, where the relation is amplified as torture when shifting perceptions present the relation in a new light (Waal and Andrews, 2022). He said, '[y]ears ago, the BBC and international media channels came to India to cover stories on human-elephant relations. Back then it was culture, now it is animal torture', referring to this perceptual shift. These narratives are common in popular media depicting how animals are captured, disciplined through confinement, and later ill-treated by mahouts. They tell how elephants are forced to participate in parades with the constant threat of being struck with a stick and how captive elephants are separated from their mothers and transported to Kerala,[67] urging for a complete ban on the private ownership of elephants.[8] Often the photographs in such articles focus on the chained leg or are shot to present the elephants without mahouts to signify the lonely and tragic lives the elephants lead in human-dominated societies (Figure 1), suggesting that elephants are mistreated in human-dominated spaces and that they 'truly' belong in the wild. Although my informants' references to such portrayals as amplifications could be right, the images reflect that mistreatment of elephants does exist, but I will come back to this later in this chapter.

Figure 1: Chained elephant.

Source: PETA India.

12 For Nitheesh, such sensationalisation meant that the nuances of the human-elephant relation got lost in these representations. Once his mother, who was too honest a person according to him, said during an interview that their elephant Arjunan is a *Brahminkutti*.[9] For Nitheesh, his mother said what was on her mind without any diplomatic filters. She must have meant that the elephant is brought up in a Brahmin tradition as the owners are Brahmins. Or as Nitheesh said,

> 'She must have meant that the elephant is vegetarian as they don't feed non-vegetarian food to the elephant. Whatever the case may be, the word *Brahminkutti* soon became a sensation in media with comments such as 'do elephants too have a caste now'? And the next time there was a video uploaded about our elephant, it was followed by the comment, 'here comes the *Brahminkutti* of Palakkad'. For YouTube channels, it is mere likes and comments, but this strikes in our hearts. The

> ones who comment might not even have seen an elephant or lived with an elephant. People only read the title of the news - the elephant that brutally killed the mahout - nobody wants to know the context or situation that caused it.'

13 Such practices of picking statements out of context and 'trolling' on social media exacerbated these misinterpretations and as Nitheesh tells, left out the contextual specificities of the human-elephant relation. Mahout Satheeshan told me '*Aa parippu ivide vekilla*',[10]implying that such people who come to narrate the story of his elephant in a tainted light have no chance with him and are reproached immediately. Such scrutinisation of their mundane activities meant that my informants had to reorient their actions (Zigon, 2007) and engage in reverse scrutinisation where unfamiliar presences such as mine were approached with caution and everyday activities such as photographing the elephant performed and contained. Although Zigon uses the notion of moral breakdown in an embodied, individual sphere, the atmosphere of fear that I encountered in several instances shows that the moral breakdown is both a collective and distributed process, at public and embodied levels. Drawing from Webb Keane who suggests that ethical questionings and self-reflections are not completely isolated from the world, as ethical intuitions are also shaped by the shared codes of values within the community (Keane, 2016), I argue that moral breakdown (Zigon, 2007) is not just an embodied, individual process but an institutional and distributed one, as also reflected by the changing legal apparatus where institutions also feel the need to reposition themselves in matters concerning animal welfare.

The Cosmopolitan Elephant: Interactions and Interconnections

14 Beyond pointing out that such portrayals left out the subtleties of the relationship, Nitheesh posed ethical conundrums in this vilification of the human-elephant relations when he said that the people who criticise 'haven't seen an elephant or lived with one properly'. Although my informants were not explicit about the regional or socio-economic background of 'such people', the statement implied that people engaging in such portrayals of human-elephant relations come from an urban upbringing and are not brought up in rural settings where human-elephant relations are common. This has come up in some instances of the animal rights discourse. In a recent petition by an activist to move Happy the elephant to a sanctuary, the zoo in the US reacted, stating that 'we are forced to defend ourselves against a group that doesn't know us or the animal in question, who has absolutely no legal standing, and is demanding to take control over the life and future of an elephant that we have known and cared for over 40 years' (Wright, 7 March 2022). Similarly, when in 2014 the *Jallikattu*[11] contests were banned by the Supreme Court in India after objections from animal rights groups, a farmer said, 'those who haven't even seen a bull in real life are preaching about animal welfare to people like us who have been living with cattle for generations. This is nonsense.'[12]

15 Such instances, on one hand, show how my informants interpret knowing an animal by living with it to preside over knowing an animal through an activism discourse. But beyond this, my informants were hinting at a definite non-groundedness of animal rights discourse where people who critique the human-elephant relations are condemned for not having a first-hand understanding of the relationship. This non-

groundedness and the globality of the animal rights discourse were also evident in my conversation with Raj where he attributed 'all these foreign funds' channelled to animal rights to be responsible for the 'misinterpretations'. Mann Barua proposes that elephants in such processes get reconfigured as a cosmopolitan category where they are mobilised as a flagship species to generate support for conservation and wildlife (Jalais, 2008; Barua, 2014). Elephants evoke global ecological responsibilities where politics and ethics become a more-than-human endeavour, in and through which, as Latour argues, 'a vast number of nonhuman entities make humans act' (Latour, 2004). However, such cosmopolitanism, as my informants suggest, strips elephants of their local specificities and historical embeddedness with humans. Indian historian Guha further notes how such narratives of portraying elephants in captivity as unnatural and torturous have a bearing on how we account for environmental conservation in post-colonial contexts (Guha, 2006), where Western ideals of conservation or the hegemony of Indian elites (Guha, 1989; Rangarajan, 1996) that view elephants as pristine beings of the wild are imposed on local South Asian communities.

16 Although many scholars have hinted at this one-sided sentiment of the animal rights discourse (Lorimer, 2010; Petitt and Brandt-Off, 2022) and the globality of it, I want to complicate Guha's and Barua's emphasis on the cosmopolitanism of the conservation discourse as a bigger entity emerging from outside by suggesting that local people too are active participants in the production of these global narratives. One needs to walk down a few steps from Lalita's home, under the shade of the Peepul tree, to reach Krishnan elephant's stable. The steps are adorned with the fallen, yellow Peepul leaves. With a 35-degree Celsius heat and a hopeless thin umbrella from Switzerland, the shade of Peepul trees was a respite. Amidst the cacophony of crows and the bird sounds I cannot identify, people who walk by, take a look at the elephant and listen to the sound of the river Kaveri, stands Krishnan elephant swinging his ears. He is managed by mahout Rajan and apprentice Sriram with occasional visits from owner Lalita. I cannot go near as Krishnan is in musth, so I observe their interactions from a distance. The cacophony of sounds, which is otherwise soothing, is a hurdle when it comes to observing them from a distance. Krishnan's legs were tied tightly as male elephants are 'aggressive' during musth, and he had developed a wound from trying to get off the chain. Such wounds, my informants said, are common during musth and require utmost care to avoid them. The musth was coming to an end and Krishnan was slowly being brought back to the usual life involving more human engagement and participation in festivals, and this was done through vocal commands and physical punishment such as beating. It was one such day, and a few people had surrounded to watch the elephant. As I and the people behind me were watching Krishnan, Lalita and Rajan spoke in a hushed voice about a boy behind me who appeared to be taking a video. I looked behind to see that the boy had his phone lifted up. Rajan walked to the boy and asked him what he was up to. The boy showed his phone saying, 'Nothing, I am just texting'. Although the conversation ended there, Lalita said she was certain that the boy was lying and told apprentice Sriram not to talk about the wound to other young men who visit the Peepul tree as they will possibly share videos or photos of the elephant on social media.

17 This incident illustrates that Lalita and others are aware of how local people appropriate and feed into the animal rights paradigm through social media. Although local people partake in this 'global' animal rights discourse through such mundane practices, the intentions behind these practices can be different from that of the animal

rights groups. I was told that people may employ the legal apparatus to obstruct a temple festival because they have some kind of enmity or jealousy with any of the stakeholders involved. According to Nidheesh,

> 'There is a section of people who think that since rich people buy elephants as they have the resources, let them face some trouble. They try to obstruct temple events, saying that we have disregarded the policies on elephant welfare. Sometimes a ritual might require that the elephant needs to be walked during the day. Even if it is a few metres, some people will try to create issues by saying that we did not follow the rules. Rules for elephant welfare are good, but it must also be an accommodation of our rituals.'

18 Although intentions can be different, local people appropriate and co-create the animal rights discourse through such quotidian activities, where the localness of the global, cosmopolitan discourse becomes legible, thus complicating the cosmopolitanism of conservation discourse and going beyond what Barua and Guha conceptualise as a Western or elitist ideal that affects the local communities. Here, diverse intentions and different groups come together to attain their separate ends and, in their interactions, produce a narrative of elephant epistemology that is stripped of its historical and ritual specificities. Such interactions and interconnections also reflect Anna Tsings' *Friction* where she explores the work of the universal by moving beyond the traps of global and culturally specific as positioned against each other, but as produced in interconnections (Tsing, 2005).

Going Beyond 'Misinterpretations'

19 Although my informants suggested that their relationship with elephants is 'misinterpreted' in the popular narratives, many felt that the changing legal apparatus such as the rules that protect elephants from standing in the sun for lengthy periods during festivals is good for the well-being of elephants.[13] Nitheesh and Anoop who were aware of the role of the animal rights groups in the implementation of the legal changes appreciated their efforts. In our conversations they also acknowledged that not everything is a misinterpretation and that there are mahouts who beat elephants without fully understanding them, suggesting that the activist narrative of the mistreatment of elephants in captive settings[14] is not completely arbitrary.

20 The dissatisfaction with the legal changes was evident in my conversations with Lalita and Rajan. Lalita was not happy with the legal apparatus that made everything procedural, where she had to assemble 'a thousand documents for anything and everything'. Mahout Rajan was disappointed by the rules that made drunk-driving punitive. Human-elephant conflict encounters are frequent during temple festivals,[15] causing damage to humans and property (Joy, 1990; Ajithkumar & Rajeev, 2003), and this has also driven the opposition towards elephant captivity. Many accidents are attributed to the 'drunken' state of musth in elephants or when mahouts are intoxicated after the consumption of alcohol (Munster, 2014); they then misread the cues of elephants, causing conflict encounters (Locke, 2015). Nitheesh said that before the new rules, mahouts often got drunk and made mistakes in understanding the elephant, causing the elephants to lose their temper. The drinking habits of the mahouts as a risky issue were also highlighted while I was growing up in Kerala and surfaced substantially during the fieldwork. Mahout Rajan's response to the legal changes that made drunk-driving punitive sheds further light on this. Rajan is a man in

his late 50s, and it was usual for Rajan to share some insights as he walked over to me after the morning work, perhaps feeling bad for all the waiting I did as I couldn't go near Krishnan in musth. He said, taking out his local cigarette (*beedi*),

> 'When I was a young mahout, I could do anything, including getting drunk. Now we are not allowed to carry the elephant in the temple after two shots. During Thrissur *pooram* (festival) years ago, I got drunk and my *mundu* (lower garment) flew away. I realised it only when I saw people laughing *(laughs)*... Now we have to report our name, star[16], everything about us. And we have to blow and if the machine beeps... that is the end.'

21 Rajan was not pleased with the legal changes that made drunk-driving punitive. Not only because drinking is claimed as an act to face the fear of handling a giant being, but such drinking practices also shaped the ritualised social production of masculinity where handling an elephant was considered to be a big achievement. Mahouting is a masculinised profession and my informants often pointed out that women don't and won't take up such 'risky and troublesome' jobs. Once I was proudly proclaiming to a cow herder in Iritty about how I had managed to feed and bathe Shekharan elephant and that the only skill left to learn is how to climb palm trees, to which he said, '*hayyye* (expressing disapproval), you don't do such difficult jobs, there are men for that!' My informants' references to the skills and courage required to handle a giant being suggested a certain (re)presentational trope to which drinking added a ritual quality, and like *Jallikattu*, a mode of displaying masculinity. The legal apparatus that took away these ritualistic aspects of drinking and made everything procedural for Lalita indicate how my informants reoriented themselves in relation to the legal apparatus.

22 Such instances also demonstrate that the interests of the elephants and that of the human handlers do not always converge, that what is good for elephant welfare might not be favourable to people. Such divergences of human and elephant interests were also reflected in the constant change of mahouts that my informants attributed as a major reason for human-elephant conflict. While mahouts stayed with a single elephant in the past allowing a long-term bond, my informants complained that mahouts change elephants frequently these days. A regular visitor at the Peepul tree platform[17] in Iritty once mentioned that 'when they find a place with a better salary, mahouts leave the existing elephant who will be replaced by another mahout. How would you know anything about the elephant, or the elephant know you in such a short period?'. The young apprentice Sriram overheard us speaking and said 'there will be love for the elephant initially. But when family troubles occur, we need money. When money is not given on time, mahouts will leave the elephant. If the salary is 1,000 rupees more somewhere, people will want to go there'.

23 Apart from the frequent change of mahouts, the lack of patience among the new mahouts was also attributed to having increased conflict incidents. There was a common narrative among the informants that although the present generation is interested in mahouting, many have lost the patience that is central to this profession. Many point out that the immediate intention of the present generation is to somehow become a mahout, touch the elephant tusk and parade the elephant in temple festivals before giving time for the human and the elephant to understand each other. Mahout Jayaraman hinted at this when he said, 'You can't come today and expect to take the elephant tomorrow. We should know the elephant and the elephant know us. We need to build trust'. Such narratives among my informants on the shifts of mahout interests and disapproval of legal changes suggest that the relationship is also an instrumental

one, where the interests of elephants and those of handlers do not necessarily converge. And therefore, the activistic/journalistic portrayals of the human-elephant relation are not totally random and stripped of the on-the-ground occurrences as some of my informants claim.

FOOTNOTES

1. Malayalam is the spoken language of Kerala and Tamil is the spoken language of Tamil Nadu.

2. A form of traditional decorative art performed on the ground using rice flour, primarily in South India.

3. The use and sale of elephant tusk for ornaments was prevalent, a practice which is illegal now given the poaching of elephants for the ivory trade.

4. Mongabay India, *As captive elephants starve, lockdown brings problematic practice to fore*, https://india.mongabay.com/2020/05/as-captive-elephants-starve-lockdown-brings-problematic-practice-to-the-fore/ (accessed on 8 March 2023).

5. India Today, *Animal rights activists demand ban on elephant rides*, https://www.indiatoday.in/mail-today/story/animal-rights-activists-demand-ban-on-elephant-rides-1109047-2017-12-18 (accessed on 8 March 2023).

6. National Geographic, *Wild Indian Elephant Dies Trying to Escape Captivity*, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/wildlife-asian-elephants-captivity-India (accessed on 8 March 2023).

7. PETA India, *HC and SC to Consider Kerala Captive Elephant Plight*, https://www.petaindia.com/blog/hc-and-sc-to-consider-kerala-captive-elephant-plight/ (accessed on 8 March 2023).

8. Mongabay India, *As captive elephants starve, lockdown brings problematic practice to fore,* https://india.mongabay.com/2020/05/as-captive-elephants-starve-lockdown-brings-problematic-practice-to-the-fore/ (accessed on 8 March 2023).

9. Brahmin child. In the caste system, brahmins belong to the upper caste.

10. The phrase is literally translated as “those lentils will not be cooked here”.

11. Traditional sport/event played with humans and bulls in Tamil Nadu.

12. BBC, *India’s animal rights activists forced to lie low*, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-40740151 (accessed on 8 March 2023).

13. According to the recent rule, elephants cannot be paraded or transported during daytime hours (10 am-3 pm).

14. National Geographic, *Wild Indian Elephants Dies Trying to Escape Captivity*, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/wildlife-asian-elephants-captivity-India (accessed on 8 March 2023).

Mongabay India, *As captive elephants starve, lockdown brings problematic practice to fore*, https://india.mongabay.com/2020/05/as-captive-elephants-starve-lockdown-brings-problematic-practice-to-the-fore/ (accessed on 8 March 2023).

India Today, *Animal rights activists demand ban on elephant rides,* https://www.indiatoday.in/mail-today/story/animal-rights-activists-demand-ban-on-elephant-rides-1109047-2017-12-18 (accessed on 8 March 2023).

15. Indian Express, *Elephants runs amok during temple festival in Kerala, stabs mahout to death*, https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2020/feb/04/elephant-runs-amok-during-temple-festival-in-kerala-stabs-mahout-to-death-2098945.html (accessed on 8 March 2023).

16. The date and hour of birth according to Indian astrology.

17. Peepul trees often have a raised platform built around them, and are a space for resting, praying and social interactions.

Where Does Nature End and Culture Begin? The Cultural Elephant

1 Although ‘misinterpretations’ of the human-elephant relations were not always arbitrary and my informants hinted at the dwindling human-elephant relations, the fear of the activist discourse that oversimplifies the bond as a relation of torture was palpable, however complex this relation is with its pitfalls. This chapter looks at how my informants respond to the ethicality of elephant captivity within the wild-domesticated, nature-culture framework and how their attributions to the sociocultural dimensions of elephant behaviour complicate these strict binary divisions.

2 The nature of communication was traditionally held to be linguistic (Mead, 1962) and as nonhumans do not verbally report to us on their experience, there was scepticism regarding animal emotions (Titon, 2021; Birch, 2022; Waal and Andrews, 2022). Such limits of communication are hinted at when Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote ‘[n]o situation seems more tragic, more offensive to heart and mind, than that of a humanity coexisting and sharing the joys of a planet with other living species yet being unable to communicate with them’ (Lévi-Strauss and Eribon, 1991). These distinctions defined by language concurrently enabled the idea of human exceptionalism, the Cartesian binary of man and animal (Derrida, 2003; Latour, 2005), and with it the idea of pristine nature out there and culture as the domain of the human (Strathern, 1980). With the more-than-human turn in social sciences, scholars are questioning the notion of human exceptionalism, bringing out the complexities of a shared world and historically situated interspecies relationships (Fuentes 2013; Govindrajan 2015; Lorimer, Hodgetts and Barua 2017; Mathur 2021). Donna Haraway’s naturecultures (2003) approach and study of companion species (2008) are insightful in analysing the inseparability of ecological relationships from the social and challenging the notion that views human interventions such as domestication as non-natural behaviour.

3 This chapter contributes to this exciting work on human-nonhuman proximal relations. The first section looks at how my informants question the ‘wildness’ attached to elephants by making comparisons to other companion species and further explores how the nature-culture, wild-domesticated binaries begin to dissolve in the human-elephant relations in Kerala. The second section delves into the cultural attributions

my informants make in distinguishing the elephants caught in Kerala forests from the elephants caught in forests of North India. I show that such character attributions on the one hand, reflect an extension of anthropomorphic geographical otherisation to elephants (Dervin, 2015), but on the other hand, show how people who closely live with elephants pay attention to the regional differences in elephant behaviour and the role of socialisation.

Why Don't You Question the Captivity of Cows and Dogs?

4 Within the scholarly-activistic production of elephants as truly belonging in the world, holding elephants in captivity is something that my informants reflected upon. Although my informants felt bad that the elephants had to be tied down, for them it was a necessity as elephants are giant beings that increase the risk of danger if allowed to roam freely in human-dominated spaces. Beyond this, they challenged my questioning of holding elephants in captivity by invoking parallels with other companion species. Lalita said, 'We tie animals like goats, cows, and dogs. Do we question it? We have to tie the ones that have to be tied. The ones that can be left untied must be left untied. Wild elephants can roam freely in the wild but tamed ones need to follow rules like humans.' This way of rationalisation by invoking the human relation with other animals was dominant in other interactions. Nitheesh, a lawyer by profession, reflected on both sides of the debate,

> 'If you ask me about elephant captivity, it sounds like a vegetarian-nonvegetarian debate. Vegetarians say it is not right to kill hens, but without killing them we cannot eat chicken. Hens have the right to live, why are we catching them, why are we killing them – there is no single answer if you ask me such questions. For a vegetarian, what a non-vegetarian does will be wrong, but non-vegetarians can ask - why do you pluck plants, they have a life too – and how do you answer such a question? All living beings have life. If so, we cannot eat tubers or fruits. This can only open a debate.'

5 Such differentiations also came up in my conversations with the young girls at the hostel where I stayed:

> Girl 1: Isn't it actually very sad, that these elephants are tied in chains?
> Girl 2: What about your dog that you keep in chains and inside your house?
> Girl 1: But we give them love.
> Girl 2: So do the mahouts and the owners.

6 My informants are drawing important parallels that challenge us to rethink the different modes through which humans interact with other species, pointing at an ethical conundrum whereby humans treat different animals differently. Human understandings of affection and utility shaped how my informants interpreted their relations with dogs and elephants. Human-dog relations are prevalent, making them familiar and hence knowable, unlike the rare human-elephant relations. As human-animal studies scholars show, classifications are influenced by sentience, affect, and utility where certain kinds of animals are typically treated better than others, which also determines which companion species relations are justified (Herzog, 2010; Hovorka, 2019).

7 Beyond the questions of affection and utility, and the absurdity of human moral puzzles as Nitheesh points out, the captivity here becomes a matter of the contested

wild-domestic divide. It is important to note that, unlike other companion species, elephants are not biologically domesticated for preferred traits, which could also suggest the 'wildness' attached to elephants over other companion species. However, the historical relations between humans and elephants in India where elephants have been used for wars, labour and religious purposes through taming practices cannot be ignored. Quoting Arthashastra, the ancient Sanskrit manual of statecraft, which explains elephant capture and active reservation of elephant habitats, Locke suggests that the human hand is not insignificant in shaping the ranging behaviour of elephants we call 'wild' and 'free-roaming' (Locke, 2016). The parallel mistreatment of biologically domesticated cows despite their avowed sacred status in India is a case in point in understanding this divide that shapes different ethical obligations. Left to scavenge in urban areas, domestic cows often come to a slow and painful end as they eat plastic-infested waste and other detritus.[1] Cows are understood to be socially intelligent but there are certain animals that particularly draw the attention of animal rights discourses and this appears to work on the threshold of an assumed binary between 'wild' and 'domestic' animals. The romanticised imaginaries of elephants in the wild channelled by the news, documentaries and other media play out in these hierarchical values placed on elephants. The assumed 'wild' and therefore 'more natural' status of elephants invites greater scrutiny and more calls for protection than animals inhabiting the realm of domestic culture.

8 Marilyn Strathern brings out the tensions between the strict binaries of nature and culture when she writes that the culture/nature distinction is itself a product of culture (Strathern, 1980). Donna Haraway builds on such tensions in her book *Companion Species* when she states:

> 'Some radical animal people are critical of any human training of another critter. What I see as polite manners and beautiful skill acquired by the dogs I know best, they regard as strong evidence of excessive human control and a sign of the degradation of domestic animals... Karen Pryor and other trainers of so-called wild animals in captivity, such as dolphins and tigers, have been accused either of ruining them by introducing nonnaturalistic behaviours' (Haraway, 2008).

9 Following Strathern and Haraway, this then begs the question: What remains of nature when nature is made culture? Can we see an animal in the so-called domestic sphere as an entity in captivity or as another example of domesticated companion species? The binary divisions of Wild vs. Captive, Nature vs. Culture begin to dissolve in the sphere of elephant ownership, where despite the pecuniary outcomes and windfalls, the human-elephant relation is an intimate companionship.

Elephants from North India 'Cheat'

10 As discussed in the last section, culture was for the longest time understood to be the domain of the human. Scholars have now not only demystified the idea of 'pristine nature' (Strathern, 1980), showing that humans and nonhumans have co-evolved, but have also demonstrated that cultural knowledge, in the sense of socially acquired and transmitted skills, is not unique to humans (Locke, 2011; Fuentes, 2013). My informants' interpretations of the behaviour of wild elephants and captive elephants echoed an understanding of these forms of socially acquired skills. A successful human-elephant bond in itself evidenced that elephants can approximate the semantic intentions behind human linguistic commands and gestures. As mahout Rajan says, 'our sound

and tone are picked up by the elephant. Palakkad elephants have Palakkad tongue.' According to my informants, elephants could understand the different styles of Malayalam[2] without much prodding or punishment, indicating that the response to a vocal command is not merely a mechanical response to disciplining strategies, but that elephants seem to approximate meaning when a similar sounding, yet new word is introduced.

11 Apart from the skills of understanding the intention behind linguistic commands and gestures, elephants were understood to exhibit regionally specific behaviours. Mahouts found elephants caught in Kerala forests to be 'smarter' than the elephants caught in North Indian forests which they attributed to the proximate human-elephant interactions in the Western ghats.

> 'The elephants in the forests here (Kerala) live closely with humans and hence they constantly check for pits with the trunk or press the mud down to see if there is a pit underneath. Bihar elephants are not that smart, we make them smart after they come here. Those elephants don't know anything, simply they follow. Elephants here are intelligent because they know about the people here. Bihar elephants are mostly in the forest, they don't know people's nature.' – Rajan.

12 As Western Ghats is biodiverse, animals live in proximate relations with humans; such close interaction has led elephants in Kerala to develop strategies to circumvent the human strategies of trapping elephants while elephants from North India don't engage frequently with humans and hence haven't adapted to human ways. Elephant behaviours were thus understood to significantly change when they lived in proximity with humans. When I recounted this to my aunt, she had an interesting encounter to share:

> 'We were going to my sister's house in Wayanad. Suddenly there was an elephant on the road, it wasn't crossing the road but just standing there, blocking the road. We were very scared; the elephant was very close to us. It was a wild elephant and if it charged at us, that would be the end. Many people tried to shoo the elephant away, but it was not moving. But the moment the green-coloured forest jeep approached; the elephant started walking to the forest. The elephant was so smart, he knew which colour the forest jeep was.'

13 Studies also show such adaptive behaviours of both humans and elephants due to frequent human-elephant conflict encounters in Wayanad where farmers point out that elephants quickly learn to circumvent all the human strategies and continue to enter the crop fields (Munster, 2016).

14 It was in the Punnathur elephant fort that I came across an interesting dimension to this geographical differentiation regarding captive elephants. As many of the captive elephants at the fort were from North Indian forests, I asked a mahout if he can differentiate between them. Besides the physical differences, the mahout said that Bihari elephants 'cheat'. I was amused at the association of the word cheat with elephants as elephants are known to be gentle, loving beings. When I asked how they cheat, he said:

> 'What is the meaning of cheat? Backstabbing. Bihari elephants do that. They are brought up in a different discipline. They love us, but they might take anger first on the mahout. But Kerala elephants protect the mahouts, they give signal with trunk to keep us away and then take the anger out on the rest of the people.'

15 I discussed this anecdote with mahout Satheeshan to know if this is something mahouts have heard from others or something they experienced, as mundane communicative

practices and interactional routines are social fields in and through which sociocultural attributions are perpetrated (Elyachar, 2010; Rumsey, 2010).

> 'If the elephant doesn't like the touch coming from someone, it might take it on the mahout. Bihari elephants are quick in reacting and do not differentiate between mahout and the rest when angry. That is the way of the elephant. I have heard of such stories and have also seen them. Elephants caught in Kerala hit people with the tail or throw a palm branch before fully losing their temper. That gives us time to move aside.' – Satheeshan.

16 The mahouts at the fort interpreted the differences between North Indian elephants as cheating and Kerala elephants as well-mannered (*maryaadhakkar*) to be agential and intentional, while Satheeshan construes it as behavioural differences, by pointing out the spontaneity of North Indian elephants and the slowness of South Indian elephants. As elephants do not verbally tell us about their intentions, whether words such as 'cheating' and 'protecting' are anthropomorphic values mahouts attach to the ways of being (*reethi*) of elephants is uncertain.

17 These regional distinctions, however, could be seen as an instance of anthropomorphising, extending the human geographical otherisation to nonhumans. The geographical distinctions of moral ascriptions are common where East-West, Mountain-Valley distinctions are evoked by communities in organising everyday life (Yanagisako, 2002; Dervin, 2015; Gal and Irvin, 2019). The semiotic logic of comparison is ubiquitous in everyday activity where differentiation depends on making comparisons and is authorised by regimes of value where in order to exist, one needs to make sense of other people as much as others make sense of us (Dervin, 2015; Gal and Irvin, 2019). This is apparent in how my informants address elephants caught in Kerala forests as *nattana* (elephants belonging to our land) while elephants caught in Bihar, Assam or Andaman are generally addressed as *Bihari* or *Assami*. Such forms of otherisation to distinguish Kerala (South India) from the North Indian states are reminiscent of a similar approach where all migrant labourers from North India are either termed as *Bengalis* or *Biharis* by the people of Kerala, terms which are now considered derogatory in the public sphere. This regional pride and sense of superiority of Kerala elephants was further manifest when the mahout at the elephant fort said, 'just look at the variety of bananas we have in Kerala. They have a special charm and taste. North Indians have just one kind of banana. Anything that is native to our land has its beauty, and it is the same with elephants.'

18 Some attributed the behavioural differences to the disciplinary strategies in North Indian states (although nobody was clear on how the disciplining strategies are different), while others suggested that the character of an elephant depends on the character of the forest they come from. Elephant photographer Anoop confirmed such geographical distinctions: 'I cannot prove it to you theoretically, but I have often heard that elephants from different forests show different character.' Reasons behind such nuances between character and place were hard to pin down although my informants found distinct patterns in elephant behaviour. Whether the nature of the discipline or the nature of the forest, it visibly shaped how the elephant and humans interacted with each other. Gibson's theory of affordances suggests that every being interacts with the World, modifying it and it modifying the being (Gibson, 1977; Ingold, 2007; Titon, 2021). Ecological psychology recognises the role of the environment in the development of a being and these attributions of geographical differences in elephant behaviour, beyond an instance of stereotypical otherisation, indicate how animals and the world co-evolve

(Costall, 2001). These geographical differences in behaviour further explain the situatedness and intersubjectivity of nonhuman species (Csordas, 1994) and how a shared environment changes living beings in distinct ways, further destabilising strict nature-culture binaries.

19 The subtle ways through which the mahouts attended to these patterns of behavioural distinctions suggest that the enmeshed nature of this interspecies relationship needs to be fleshed out more and shown to be a lot more complex than animal rights activism or legal discourse can adequately understand, explain, and represent. The anxieties my interlocutors express regarding the 'elephant belongs to the wild' narrative is profound and produced in relation to a certain legal and activistic framing of human-animal relationality that is understood to be limited in understanding what it is like to live intimately with 'other'.

FOOTNOTES

1. Independent, *Inside India's plastic cows; How sacred animals are left to line their stomachs with polythene*, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/india-delhi-plastic-cows-shelters-bjp-modi-gaushala-a8794756.html (accessed on 8 March 2023).

2. There are regional distinctions in spoken Malayalam.

Interspecies Assemblages: Of Attunement and Relationality

> In this interconnection of embodied being and environing world, what happens in the interface is what is important. – Don Ihde, *Bodies in Technology*, 2002, p.8

1 Attempting to practice the anthropologist's task of thick description, this chapter probes the nuances that govern the human-elephant relationships in Kerala that in my informants' view are often overlooked by the activism discourse, thus producing a partial, thin description of the relation. This sentiment has been questioned by several scholars but especially Haraway, who, following Hearne (2007), criticises the activistic conviction that training animals is just about simple domination, arguing that it is a rich and subtle conversation between the animal and the trainer (Haraway, 2008). The interspecies literature in anthropology has disrupted the strict human dominator/ nonhuman dominated dichotomy and pays attention to the sensorial modes of communication that shape these human-nonhuman interactions (Pollen, 2001; Kohn, 2007; Locke, 2013; Mondeme, 2018), reflecting a general ethical reorientation towards animal engagement in the social science scholarship. The attention Haraway confers to 'response and regard' indicates that her approach to human-animal communication is an acknowledgement of the moral entanglements we find ourselves in with the nonhuman (Haraway, 2008; Kulick, 2017).

2 Studies that reflect the interspecies moral milieu are primarily addressed through compelling propositions of kinship relations and the role of sacrifice in human-goat sociality (Govindrajan, 2015), how one ought to kill animals (Singh and Dave, 2015), the ethical implications of the scientific awareness of animal intelligence (Singer, 1990; Kulick, 2017; Birch, 2022; Wall and Andrews, 2022), perspectivism (Kohn, 2007), the sensoriality of 'witnessing' and locking of eyes between human-nonhuman that enable a sense of responsibility in animal activism (Dave, 2014), etc. While these approaches are insightful for examining the ethical complexities that shape interspecies relations, they fall short of probing the moral experience through a phenomenological take. Naisargi Dave's work on witnessing (2014) is an interesting entry point into the sensorium of interspecies engagements, however, she uses the political as the major

axis of analysing the sensorial nuances, an insightful approach nevertheless. In her later work on moods and modes of killing animals (Singh and Dave, 2015), Dave acknowledges the benefits of the anthropology of ethics approach in interspecies relations but continues to use the political as the primary analytical tool, developing on Agamben's concept of bare life. I, therefore, argue that incorporating concepts from an anthropology of ethics and morality (Zigon, 2007; Desjarlais and Throop, 2011) can be incisive in filling this gap. What I do, then, is to put the anthropological theories on morality and ethics to test where it has not been used, and show what such integrative approaches can reveal.

3 Fassin postulates that his project of moral anthropology requires anthropologists to consider their own and others' prejudices as objects of scientific investigation (Fassin, 2008), suggesting the need to study the situatedness of morality. Anthropologists of morality argue that this is important not only to interrogate the moral worlds we and our interlocutors occupy but to move beyond the assumed Western philosophical approaches to ethics and attend to local moral frameworks (Zigon, 2010). Although there is an ongoing debate on where anthropologists locate the ethical (Mattingly and Throop, 2018), whether in the ordinary or in particular moments, I will use these approaches complementarily as they seem to have much in common and are pertinent to the human-elephant entanglements. Zigon explains the value of the analytical tool of moral assemblage in studying moral and ethical modalities as it does not assume morality as a top-down, normative approach but goes beyond this, providing a nuanced perspective of the fuzzy, fragmentary, and often contradictory moral milieu, where particular social contexts are defined by unique local moralities (Zigon, 2010). Jason Throop, through his work among the Yap community, shows how the phenomenological – the sentiments and sensibilities that are sensory, emotional and embodied play out in everyday moral experience (Throop, 2012). As Mattingly and Throop argue, humans are intimately intertwined with other beings, including elephants, in significant ways that place ethical demands on us as to how to respond (Mattingly and Throop, 2018), whereas Zigon proposes that the attunement itself becomes an ontological condition for morally being-in-the world (Zigon, 2014).

4 Grounding this chapter in the ethical turn in anthropology was imperative because studying human-elephant relations in Kerala required paying attention to the sentiments and emotions (Throop, 2012) that dominate the interspecies realm in Palakkad. Although the chaining of elephants as a general ethical issue was reflected by some of my informants as I show in the second chapter, most people I spoke to did not place the question of captivity in the wider political-ethical context of whether elephants should belong in the wild or with humans, but rather were concerned about their individual elephants and their individual relations. Their moral sentiments were configured by historic, economic, and cultural concerns (Fassin, 2012), but most importantly by phenomenological concerns (although these concerns are all interspersed) that are embedded in these ordinary yet extraordinary relations. For my informants who live with elephants, it is the phenomenological nuances of the relation such as experiences of trust, mutual acknowledgement and the attunement of the relation that shaped their moralscapes (Throop, 2012). This emphasis on the sensorial and moral realms of the relation, I realised, is best explained conceptually by employing attunement, moral assemblage, and sentiments (Zigon and Throop, 2014) to the domain of interspecies. Engaging with these concepts in the ethical turn and incorporating phenomenological approaches that explore the sensorial realm in

interspecies companionship (Zahavi, 2011; White, 2013; Ford, 2019; Mondeme, 2020), I ask how the phenomenological relations between humans and elephants shape the moral worlds that my informants construct and construe. In analysing the different sections—the sacredness attached to mahouting, various dimensions of human-elephant attunement, the reversal of ownership, sensorium of touch and recognition of the uniqueness of elephants—I put the ethical turn in anthropology to test to explore what it can tell us about interspecies assemblages.

Gajakesariyogam: A Special Calling

5 In *Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species* Anna Tsing writes, 'human nature is an interspecies relationship', indicating the embeddedness of the human in the nonhuman (Tsing, 2015). The humans of Kerala are deeply embedded in their years-old relationship with elephants where affecting and being affected, caring for and being cared for shape the interspecies field (Haraway, 2008). Unlike the ubiquitous companion species such as dogs or cats that are part of the human domestic sphere and familiar to immediate family and friends, the captive elephants who grow up as members of a family or temple trust are recognised not just within the immediate human relations but represent the entire village they come from. Embedded in relations of care, pride, and sacredness, they are members of the family, the asset of the village and beings destined to carry the sacred idol during the annual temple festival. This sense of collective appropriation of captive elephants is evident in how everyone in Palakkad had stories to tell about each elephant and its character specificities, although the relation that mahouts and owners build with the elephant is different from the collective relationship with the elephant as a community emblem. In this sense, unlike dogs, goats, cows, etc., elephants are at once private companion species entangled in everyday affective intimacies as well as public symbols of pride, wonderment, fandom, and devotion. This is manifest in the naming practices where the name of the elephant is preceded by the name of the village they come from such as 'Iritty Krishnan' or 'Kinattinkara Devaswom Shekharan'. While such naming practices that include the name of ancestors, clan, and village are common among human communities, this is not usually extended to other nonhuman species, making elephants an integral and recognised part of the village.

6 Mahouts in Kerala are addressed as elephant-people (*aanakar*), where imagining a mahout is impossible without invoking the elephant, where mahouts and elephants *become with each other* (Haraway, 2008). For my informants, this is not a job that anyone can just take up. To be a mahout or own an elephant is interpreted among my informants as a vocation - that only a few have been called for. Lalita claims that her father who had over three elephants was blessed with *gajakesariyogam* – a term in Malayalam that indicates the divine calling to be with elephants. The presence of a linguistic concept that is specifically used to denote this vocation further reflects the historical and emotional significance people attach to being a mahout or elephant owner in Kerala. Mahout Rajan substantiated this emotional significance when he said he had 'a feeling' in mind that he is destined to be a mahout and despite several injuries involving elephants he does not regret the choice. Such associations of 'calling' and 'destiny' reflect the affective attachment that mahouts ascribe to the profession (Nath, 2017). Although my informants interpret it as a calling or a feeling, it is not devoid of

influences from early childhood exposure to elephants and temple festivals. All my informants saw elephants frequently during their childhood which shaped their 'feeling' and 'calling' for this profession. This was well explained during a conversation with mahout Satheeshan:

> 'While growing up, we had many mango trees near our house. Learning commands from my brother who was a mahout, I would sit on the branch of the mango tree imagining it to be an elephant. Then I would take two leaf clusters and place them on either side of the branch, like elephant ears. I would then take a stick (that mahouts use to discipline the elephant) and begin the *vaaythaari*[1]- turn right, turn left...'.

7 *Aanaye kandu valarnu* (grew up seeing elephants) was a common narrative among my informants, suggesting that early childhood exposure influenced the decision to become a mahout, although not all people who are exposed to elephants end up becoming a mahout; calling or destiny was claimed to matter. However, as I mentioned in the first chapter, many mahouts change elephants for better wages or due to disagreements with the owners and hence the vocation is not devoid of the material aspects of a job. Nonetheless, this does not negate the sacred and affective ascriptions my informants associate with the profession, which in itself suggests a way of being with elephants (Zigon, 2014). As Zigon claims, mahouts are essentially relational beings who, by the very nature of their profession, are beings-in-relation with elephants that are not separated from their everyday moralities (Zigon, 2014).

Metaphors of Riding and Attunement

8 I was speaking to a mahout at the elephant fort in Guruvayur who was idling away the time as his elephant was in musth. A female tourist who was looking at the famous Punnathur fort behind the mahout casually joined our conversation. For every question I posed, she followed it up with another. Although I was quite confused and amused by her intervention in a dyadic conversation, she was a curious character. Seeing the long stick behind the elephant's ears, she asked the mahout why the stick was kept there. The mahout said, 'why do we keep a huge block/brick (*katta)* behind the vehicle tire on a slope? Then the vehicle stays there as we kept it. It is the same with elephants.' Statements such as these where mahouts compare elephants to vehicles were common. 'I put my toes up, and the elephant lifts the palm leaves. If I leave my toes hanging, he will walk slow', said Rajan. These statements may convey an imagery of elephants as static beings that we humans act upon, like a car. Turn on. Press the brakes. Turn off. These acts can sound mechanical, but the more I hung out with mahouts and elephants, it became evident that the movements emerge from a dynamic pedagogical relation, where the human and the elephant move in rhythms, influencing and influenced by each other through shared meaning – that Nitheesh described as 'teamwork'. The pressure from the mahout's toe moves through the rope around the neck to the skin of the elephant who then interprets the cue and takes action. At the same time, mahouts learn how to move or when to pause based on their understanding of the elephants as some elephants are slow, some quick in action. To be a skilled mahout, for my informants, lies in the ability to understand the ways of the elephant. A conversation with mahout Satheeshan demonstrated this:

> 'During our walks, Shekharan is usually fed by people on our usual route. It is a habit for them and Shekharan. But there was a particular bakery he was very fond

> of. He would slow down on reaching the bakery, and until he received something, even a small toffee would suffice, Shekharan wouldn't leave. The shop was closed a few years ago, but poor Shekharan doesn't know that bakery is no more. He still slows down and waits for a minute when he reaches the building.'

9 Far from being a purely mechanistic relation, using simple commands or prodding, Satheeshan and Shekharan elephant share an understanding of each other. Csordas' definition of 'somatic modes of attention' (1993) is of value here, which he defines as the culturally elaborated ways of attending to each other when the cues by the rider or the elephant become so subtle, and they subconsciously anticipate each other's action rather than reacting to them. This anticipation became prominent in the Satheeshan-Shekharan relation.

10 One day, Shekharan elephant, Satheeshan and I were returning to the temple from Shekharan's grazing area and, on the way, Satheeshan met his friends and began to chitchat. But Shekharan kept walking. Seeing this, a neighbour lady called out, 'Satheesha! See Shekeharan is on his own'. Satheeshan reassured her saying that he would stop before the road. I waited to see if Shekharan really would stop or walked ahead. To my surprise, Shekharan stopped right before the road and waited for Satheeshan to join him, swinging his ears. Such intuitive ways of predicting and anticipating an elephant's actions characterised this relation beyond the fulfilment of an elephant's immediate needs in exchange for obedience and cooperation (Locke, 2015). Describing his field experience as a mahout, anthropologist Locke writes '[a] wiggle of her head would inform me I was misapplying my toes, her insistence on turning left when I was trying to turn right during grazing would be revealed not as disobedience on her part, but rather her way of directing me toward the plant matter she liked for food or medicine' (Locke, 2015). Intentions become intertwined, and both humans and elephants are cause and effect of each other's movements. Bruno Latour writes about how there is not a single puppeteer who does not claim that the puppet character makes them do motions in the story and instigates new ways of moving, suggesting that a clear sense of causality becomes difficult to pinpoint in attachments (Latour, 1999). Who influences and who is influenced in this relation has no clear answer (Haraway, 2008), and such unsaid norms where interactants learn to act and interpret the actions of their co-interactants become fundamental to attaining attunement (Young, 2013). The process of becoming a domestic elephant and for a human to become an elephant-person is thus a relational process configured through particular social bonds and life habits where they get attuned over time (Whatmore and Thorne 2000; Throop 2003; Zigon 2014).

11 Such forms of knowing also surfaced in how the villagers reacted to Shekharan grazing in the open space. Satheeshan, Shekharan and I walked to drop off Shekharan to graze, accompanied by 'Shekharaa' calls from little kids and banana gifts from the families we met on our way (Figure 2). As we reached the grazing area, Shekharan walked off and Satheeshan watched him go like a proud father. Shekharan was not tied to a tree or pole like the cows or goats that are tied when they are sent for grazing. The village and Satheeshan trusted that Shekharan wouldn't create havoc. Shekharan could go away if he wanted to, but he didn't; probably because he didn't know the route to the forest or because he knew that he was here to graze. This extraordinary gesture of trust among the villagers in this giant being and Shekharan's acknowledgement of the trust are a striking testimony to the bond the elephant has built with them over these years. As

these instances show, the relationship between people and Shekharan was not confined by mechanistic defines, but by attuning and knowing.

Figure 2: Shekharan being fed bananas on the way.

Photos taken by the author.

Attunement: Gaining Trust and Giving Trust

12 Trust (*vishwasam)* emerged as a common prerequisite for this attunement between an elephant and a human. In building trust, time emerged as a central category whereby it is only by spending a long time with the elephants that the elephant and the mahout get to know each other. I was constantly told by mahouts that I cannot understand an elephant in a day or two, as one requires at least 1-2 years to understand the elephant and for the elephant to understand you. The value of familiarity in knowing each other and predicting each other's actions (Demsar, 2016) is highly valued among mahouts, the lack of which, as I mentioned in the first chapter, is attributed to causing human-elephant conflict encounters. Spending time with elephants also involved practices such as a pat on the head, congratulatory talk, or smear of dirt (Locke, 2011) to build trust. Once the trust is gained, mahouts and owners are expected to maintain the trust, like in human relations. As Lalita said, 'Krishnan will sleep only where there is trust. He feels at home only in his stable near our house. So we don't let him sleep on temple premises during festivals. We take only nearby temple festivals so he can always come back here to sleep. I go to see him at night before sleep, morning, and afternoon. That is why we have kept him close. We want to see him and he wants to see us'.

13 The significance of hierarchy in human-elephant relations is also indicative of this trust-building and attunement. Most elephants can only have one primary mahout

(*onnam pappan*) followed by a second mahout (*randam pappan*) while some elephants can listen to two or three mahouts at a time. The first mahout controls the elephant while the second mahout is responsible for cleaning the stable and cooking the elephant's meal although the first mahout too does the job of the second mahout sometimes. The mahouts I spoke to were with elephants who would only allow one mahout at a time. If an outsider needs to touch or feed, the first mahout must be in the vicinity, and he must say 'you can touch or you can give'. Even the second mahout can only manage the elephant with permission from the first mahout. This privilege of the first mahout is shaped by the elephant's allegiance and attunement to the first mahout over the second mahout. Mahout Satheeshan says,

> 'Since I am the main person, Shekharan follows my ways. My son will follow my way. If different mahouts try different ways, it can be confusing for the elephant. If the second mahout follows my way, then it is okay. But if the second mahout behaves in one way when I am here and in another way when I am away, then the elephant doesn't trust the second mahout and it leads to conflict.'

14 This co-learning that occurs between the mahout and the elephant also shows the intersubjectivity of attunement, the reciprocity of trust, and the responsibility that both the elephant and the mahout take in adapting to the other interactant. I was told stories of how elephants protect the mahouts they are attuned to by any means, suggesting this mutuality of trust. Given this value of allegiance, to be a first mahout is considered a prestigious achievement (Locke, 2011).

15 This privileged relation is an experience that apprentice Sriram is yet to experience. For Sriram, the current activities involve getting the palm leaves for the elephant, cleaning the stable and climbing palm trees or peepul trees for fodder. An apprentice cannot go in front of the elephant or touch the elephant in the absence of a mahout. Not just because of the professional hierarchy, but because the elephant will not entertain such approaches. One day when mahout Rajan stepped out for a bit, Sriram tried to command the elephant from a distance, like an excited young student who wants to play with words before learning sentence formation. Sensing that the commands did not work, he turned towards me and said, 'I need to learn more in terms of voice modulation and loudness to have a commanding voice.' But it was not just about the voice, it was also about the elephant deciding whom to trust, reflecting the significance of an attuned relation and the privileges it brings.

16 This reciprocity of trust meant that, like in human interactions, a single act can breach the contract of trust despite the years taken to build it. Recounting an event when his parent's elephant killed its second mahout, Nitheesh said,

> 'From what we know, the elephant had just finished the musth and the second mahout was recently appointed. We understand that the mahout did not approach the elephant the way a mahout should. Before familiarising much or taking on many responsibilities, one should approach an elephant only in the presence of the first mahout. So, the event could have been a mistake in understanding the elephant and making appropriate judgments.'

17 Although it is hard to pinpoint the reason for human-elephant conflicts as the elephant viewpoint can only be accessed through human interpretations, my informants agree that conflict encounters can occur when mahouts change the usual ways and elephants lose trust. Nitheesh's experience shows that, like in humans, a single failure in interpreting signals from an elephant can cause a breach of trust. As Rajan says, 'elephants usually check with their trunk and legs for any pits when they walk. But we

mahouts need to be careful as well. If they miss a pit and fall, the elephant loses the trust in us'. In analysing the dynamics of trust, Luhmann suggests that, in trusting, the past prevails over the present and future actions, thus helping to manage the social complexity of the world (Luhmann, 1982). Mahouts acknowledge that, like humans, elephants are constantly processing the actions of the mahout to determine the trustworthiness and therefore, they need to be careful and attentive in this relation where a misstep or an ignorant move can easily break the trust. This is further complicated, as unlike in human relationships where people can explain the reasons behind the misstep, the differences in our communication prevent us from offering an explanation to the elephant, leading to a permanent ripple in the relationship. While it is the ability of both humans and elephants to communicate nonverbally amongst themselves that allow us to do so between different species (Ford, 2019), the limitations of communication leave the breach of trust without an opportunity for explanations, causing damage to the human-elephant relation. The mutual responsibility that comes with this attunement, where mahouts need to be on constant lookout to maintain the trust, reflects the moral nuances that shape the elephant-human interactions (Zigon, 2012). Much like an anthropologist, one could say that the mahout therefore continually relies on producing 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) to decipher subtle shifts in the elephant's semiotic signalling.

The Semantics of Beating in Discipline: Torture and Punishment

18 Although humans and elephants need to be attuned to each other for a successful bond, it is important to acknowledge that attunement does not emerge from just spending time with the elephant through a system of rewards. A mahout doesn't find itself attuned to an elephant but needs to develop the bond where the elephant learns to be a 'good elephant' that would listen to the mahout and cause less trouble for the people. This includes not only a system of rewards but physical punishment, given that it is a giant being with a different set of communicative practices. However, the infliction of pain was not a mindless act for my informants:

> 'There are specific positions where you can beat the elephant. Just because it is a huge body, you cannot just beat everywhere. You need to avoid soft and delicate places as the sense of shock and pain can be high. The stick must be made with specific metal that does not cause infection. Even if it is a single beat, it can affect the elephant's behaviour in the future. Even for human children, we don't beat them just anywhere.'– Nitheesh.
>
> 'Disciplining occurs through both positive reinforcement (sweet food) and punishment. Even if we are beating our kids, if they have the understanding (*bodhyam)* that we do it out of love, then it will be successful.'– Nitheesh.
>
> 'Torture assumes that the intention is to hurt the elephants. We don't beat our elephants because we want to hurt them. But because this is the only way to discipline them.'- Anoop

19 My informants draw parallels between disciplining elephants and disciplining human children although the strategies for elephants can be harsher given the bodily and communicative differences between human children and elephants. Corporal punishment of children is a technique (although contentious in contemporary human pedagogy and elephant domestication) of disciplining, where hitting, striking, etc. are

carried out to punish, discipline or show disapproval (Ember and Ember, 2005). Anoop argues that in the same way that human parents discipline children, the intention behind the infliction of pain is not to hurt elephants but to discipline them. This notion of intention in the action was central to my informants, yet it doesn't surface in the activist narratives of torture where the visual imageries of beating dominate the popular discourse. What was torture for activists and journalists had different semantics for the mahouts where the infliction of pain was a disciplining strategy.

20 Among the Mapuche (Araucanians) of Chile, corporal punishment of children is employed sometimes, but not usually as a first resort (Ember and Ember, 2005). Like the Mapuche of Chile, physical punishment was used by the mahouts only as a last resort. When Shekharan elephant did not follow a command, it was followed by a louder command two to three times and if not successful, it was then followed by a beating. The nuances of beating significantly surfaced when Krishnan elephant was completing his musth. As Krishnan was in musth and therefore away from human engagement, he had to be reminded of the human commands that required disciplinary strategies such as beating. However, the infliction of pain was not a straightforward task but mired in arguments between Lalita and Rajan over what is the right course of action. One morning as I was approaching Krishan's stable, I saw Lalita standing outside and looking at the elephant. She was hunching as if she was hiding in a children's game and signalled me to be silent by placing her second finger on her mouth, her lips slightly protruding. Rajan mahout was instructing the elephant through voice commands along with his son who had joined to help, as two mahouts are required during the transition phase. Lalita and I watched Rajan give loud commands and occasional beatings to get the elephant to listen, but Krishnan wasn't budging much. After a few minutes, Lalita tells me, 'If I go in, mahout will have no value in front of the elephant', suggesting that Krishnan preferred Lalita over the mahout. This was not news to me as people who hang out at the Peepul tree had told me about the affection that Lalita and Krishnan had for each other, which didn't please Rajan very much as, thanks to Lalita, his value in front of the elephant was a bit shaky. Although she acknowledged the need to maintain her distance and give power over to the mahout, Lalita expressed her disapproval of punishment through constant sounds 'hmms, noooo, don't beat' etc. She told me how Rajan doesn't listen to her. She slowly went inside the stable but hid behind a bush so Krishnan couldn't see her. Although an elephant identifies a person primarily by the voice and the scent, Lalita seemed to be overwhelmed by the love for her elephant that she had forgotten that the human ways of perception are different from that of the elephant. After a few minutes, Lalita approached Rajan and told him not to beat Krishnan. An argument was brewing. Rajan said that without a beating, Krishnan won't listen, and we won't be able to untie him whereby the wound on the elephant's leg will worsen. But Lalita didn't want the elephant to be hurt through beating. Krishnan was hurt either way - whether through the growing infection or beating. But to inflict pain or not, as the case of Krishnan elephant tells, was not an easy decision but complicated by the worry over hurting the elephant and the frictions between owners and mahouts.

21 The tension between Lalita and Rajan reminded me of a conversation with Rajan that highlighted the similarity of the human-elephant bond to the parent-child relationship in humans. Rajan said, 'Whatever happens, Krishnan won't ill behave with his owner Lalita. Even during the musth, she can go in front and give him food in his mouth. It is a

relationship of 25 years. No elephant will allow even their own mahout near them during musth.' Even other informants were filled with wonder when they spoke about Krishnan's behaviour with Lalita as it is unusual for an elephant to allow a human near him during musth (Figure 3). I was told that even the sweetest elephant will have a different character during musth, but not Krishnan with Lalita. Between them, I saw a privileged form of intimate, interspecies relation. When I suggested that it must be his love for Lalita, Rajan said: 'She doesn't beat or scold Krishnan and brings food for him all the time. To love is easy then'. My response with wonder and awe at what I thought was a precious form of interspecies relationship was put off by Rajan's comment. For Rajan, this is not a magical relation that only Lalita can attain, but possible depending on the length and the nature of the relationship (with more positive reinforcement and less punishment). The similarity of such narratives to human parent-child relations is clear, where parents complain that grandparents spoil the children by meeting all their demands easily.

Figure 3: Lalita talking to Krishnan elephant in musth (the musth period is indicated by the gland secretion behind the eyes).

Photo taken by the author.

22 Beyond such nuances that shape the punishment and resemblances to the human parent-child relationship, the cultural connotations of beating required more unpacking. I was told that a well-timed, intuitive beating can work as an effective strategy of distraction among some elephants when they are about to lose their temper, thus avoiding a possible conflict situation. During festivals, mahouts sit under the trunk of the elephant to attend to these small differences in elephant cues. Such intuitive beating as a strategy of distraction is common in human parent-child relations as well. A story from my childhood might be worth telling here. I was three years old then. It was late evening and my grandmother had asked me to turn on the

lights in our veranda. As I stepped out, I saw a woman on the veranda with a towel on her head, holding a child. The woman was my aunt and the child she was holding was my nephew. She was trying to put him to sleep but in that moment of faint darkness, she looked unfamiliar - a stranger holding a stranger. I ran back to my grandmother, shivering. Seeing me terrified, she gave me a tight slap following which I had a long crying session. Growing up, I was told that she slapped me to distract me from the shock that might have a long-term effect on me. While my intention is not to uphold the justification of physical violence, the contextual nuances of a slap require revisiting and rethinking through the cultural frameworks. This appropriately timed 'slap' is invested with the quality of distraction. But for an outsider who is not familiar with the nuanced meaning of the act, a slap is a slap. The contextuality of slap is an interesting metaphor to think with, an instance of an archetypical 'thick description moment' which allows us to see, deeply, in a culturally contingent manner that which stays fuzzy and beyond the obvious. A slap as an interpretation of bodily techniques of power and hierarchy only offers a thin description, whereas, as Gomart and Hennion in drawing from Foucault show, the nuances of the act allow us to see that power not only hides and reduces but produces and enables (Gomart and Hennion, 1999).

Reversal of Ownership

23 As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the mahouts I spoke to took up this profession from the love for elephants and to be in their vicinity. Shekharan's second mahout Jayaraman said, 'I can never get bored of watching the sea and the elephant'. It is not uncommon for people who grew up in the proximity of elephants to say that elephants are a calm species (except when they lose their temper) and that they could watch an elephant forever. Perhaps the rhythmic swinging of the elephant ears resembles the waves of the sea, the repetitive movement having a calming effect on humans (Bell et al., 2015). As much as the profession emerges from the love for elephants, the love sustains not just from seeing elephants but from being acknowledged by the elephant. Although elephants in captivity are projected as beings just to be looked at (Berger, 2009), that is a reductive and partial perspective that denies other perspectives on human-elephant relations that my informants claim to have with their elephants.

> 'An elephant is a giant being and the acknowledgement it gives the human—that this is our person— is an extraordinary feeling. A creature that we look at with wonder is listening to us out of love.' – Nidheesh.
>
> 'When I approach, Krishnan makes a distinct nasal sound *ho ho*. If we are at a temple festival, he will especially know if I am near him. He feels a sense of relief – *havoo*[2] my people have come, they have reached. And he doesn't want anyone else after that. He will keep staring at me. Even if I stand at the back, he will know...What do elephants not know.'– Lalita.
>
> 'Even if I am a kilometre away if a strong wind blows from my side to his, he can take the scent and know that I am there, that his person is there.'– Satheeshan.

24 Talking on behalf of the elephant was common among mahouts and elephant owners. Such practices are common in social media where people upload pictures of their dogs or cats with titles such as 'The dog or cat (name) and his hooman'. Although elephants are owned by humans in terms of the legal and financial semantics of ownership, emotional ownership was interpreted to be mutual. It is not just that it is a human and

his/her elephant, but it is an elephant and his human – thus reversing the semantics of ownership. My informants used possessive pronouns such as 'my people', 'my person', 'our person', etc. in expressing the subjectivity of the elephant, indicating how an elephant reacts to seeing its owner or mahout. Anthropologist Piers Lock's experiences as a mahout during his fieldwork in Nepal is revelatory of this sense of allegiance in elephants. 'If I dropped my stick, which I carried to discipline her should the need arise, she would pick it up and hand it to me with her trunk' (Locke, 2015).

25 Physical gestures from the elephant were central to people's interpretation of how the elephant differentiates his person from the rest of the humans. Rajan's words are striking:

> 'When we eat in temple premises during festivals, we fold the banana leaf and put it in its mouth. If we are sitting next to the elephant, we are bound to give food. Our conscience will not allow us to do otherwise. We are elephant-people (*aanakar)*; our food comes from the elephant. Some mahouts even give a drag of smoke. Sometimes, if we eat in the elephant's presence and don't share the food, the elephant will not allow us to untie it in the evening.'

26 Although Rajan shares the food out of gratitude as Rajan is dependent on the elephant for his income, the sharing of food is not an everyday activity but occurs when the act of eating is witnessed by the elephant. Being seen by the elephant places a responsibility on the mahout to share the food, the failure of which might cause displeasure in the elephant and result in the disruption of usual patterns such as not allowing the mahout to untie the elephant. Social aspects of eating are important where sharing food from one's plate is not only a gesture of affection from the person who shares the food, but it is demanded by the other person (Hamburg et al., 2014). I once refused my sister a share from my plate, complaining that she always asks for a bite when I eat. Seeing my sister hurt, my mother told me: 'She asks you for a bite because you are her elder sister. She doesn't ask any random person on the street. What do you lose in life by giving one?'. Such mundane gestures of affection are central to the maintenance of a social and emotional bond, not just among humans but between humans and elephants. Being a mahout means that the elephant places certain demands (beyond providing food and shelter) on you that must be fulfilled, where the unfulfillment of the demands placed upon each other can have consequences. Psychologist Vincent Despret and anthropologist Jason Throop argue that it is through such practices that beings become available to each other and learn to not only 'affect' but be 'affected' (Throop, 2003; Despret, 2004; Zigon, 2014). Such events show that elephants are attached to humans as much as humans are to elephants in this entanglement, where one cannot draw a clear line in visualising these attachments which are interlaced in connections **(**Latour, 1999; Hennion, 2017).

27 Anthropologist Piers Locke writes about an interesting encounter as elephant Sitasma's mahout. Once another elephant Puja Kali lost her temper as Locke approached her. Other mahouts stated that this temperament was natural, given the hostility between Sitasma and Puja Kali. Thus, Locke realised that he was marked as Sitasma's human not just by the mahouts and Sitasma but by other elephants such as Puja Kali, 'where being Sitasma's person raised more questions than Sitasma being his' (Locke, 2015), thereby making Locke Puja Kali's enemy, by extension. Such expressions of anger or disapproval show that the emotional nuances of an interspecies relationship are not only available to the human part of the human-elephant pair but also to the elephant (Ford, 2019), whereby elephants extend allegiance to humans through such relations.

This attunement, of being engaged and entangled in particular relationships itself makes possible a distinct way of living between humans and elephants, constituting, as Zigon suggests, attuned entanglement as an ontological condition for morally being-in-the-world (Zigon, 2014).

Attunement and Haptic Sociality

28 In the ordinary relations between elephant and mahout, touch emerges as a central form of sensing. Scholars use the term haptic sociality to refer to shared experiences through touch (Cekaite and Kvist Holm, 2017). Chloe Mondeme argues that touching and petting sequences are choreographed and mutually accomplished by dogs and human participants where she explores touch as central in domestication practices and as a practice for the pure pleasure of entering into tactile contact with another being (Mondeme, 2020). Unlike human-dog or human-cat relations where touch is extended to several people, the elephants reserve these privileged forms of interactions for the person most attuned, usually the first mahout. This was explicit during the bathing of Shekharan, where Satheeshan was allowed to wash the frontal regions as the elephant only permits the first mahout to touch in places where major sensory organs are present. Satheeshan scrubs Shekharan's trunk rhythmically, singing Shekharan's favourite Malayalam song '*kannadi puzhayude kadavathu nikkana...*' while Jayaraman washes the back of the elephant, simultaneously getting hit by Shekharan's tail. I was made to stand and scrub in 'safe places'– places away from his face and back as elephants can easily recognise an unfamiliar touch that will be responded to by gestures such as hitting with the tail or the trunk. Satheeshan made this apparent when his son came over to help with washing Shekharan and sat on the elephant's back to scrub him. Shekharan was extremely sleepy that day and began to snore within the first ten minutes of the 5-hour long bath, also making me yawn. Satheeshan told his son, 'Shekharan is letting you sit on him just because he is asleep. If not, you would have gotten one from him by now', explaining the distinctions that the elephant makes in deciding whose touch is permitted and where one can touch. Such distinctions in Shekharan's attitude towards a different human touch reflect how elephants protect and privilege sensory parts as these allow them to navigate the complex world and equally complex relationships around them.

Figure 4: Satheeshan and researcher bathing Shekharan, Jayaraman is behind.

Photo taken by Satheeshan's friend.

29 There were specific body movements through which elephants expressed allegiance and affection for the mahout such as swinging the ears, putting the genitals out and urinating. However, having not been acquainted with elephants, these subtle changes in elephant gestures when they see their mahout were new that I puzzled over. In phenomenological studies exploring 'mind reading' between humans, scholars argue that we grasp others' feelings and intentions through perceptions of embodied behaviour (Gallagher, 2008; Zahavi, 2011), suggesting that most events in everyday life are interpreted through direct social perception. But as scholars of phenomenology and my informants show, this knowledge comes only with the practice of inhabiting the same society and reacting to the interspecies dynamics that involve interpretations of postures, gestures, and movements. To paraphrase Clifford Geertz, without the knowledge of context, how can I tell the difference between a blink and a wink? (Geertz, 1973).

30 Although the lack of familiarity inhibited these subtle, visceral expressions of affection, I was fortunate to see some of these gestures in elephant Shekharan's interactions with Satheeshan. As we were returning after dropping off Shekharan to graze, Satheeshan said, 'I don't know how to express it. Sometimes, he pees on seeing me, sometimes he makes sounds, sometimes he comes down to hug me and I hug him and kiss him. I do what I feel like then. Sometimes I bite, sometimes I gently slap. That is between us.' A few hours later, we went to pick up Shekharan. When he sensed Satheeshan's presence, Shekharan immediately put his penis out and began to pee. A strange form of affection for human ways. Satheeshan walked to Shekharan, removed the fluid in his eyes and said something in Shekharan's ears (Figure 5). Perhaps sweet talk. Shekharan bent down as if asking for a gentle pat and Satheeshan bit his ears. As much as I was surprised to see that Satheeshan bit Shekharan out of affection, it was riveting to see that Shekharan bent down to seek a bite, as biting or submitting oneself to be bitten intentionally was something I had assumed to be a human gesture. Such petting sequences, as Mondeme argues, show that touching and petting can be initiated by both humans and elephants in these domestic settings and that elephants actively elicit

petting and biting (Mondeme, 2020). In line with Merleau-Ponty's intercorporeality (1945) and Throop's work on tactility and empathy (2012), I show that some experiences such as touching, petting and biting are jointly experienced (Ciaunica, 2017). In this respect, seeing the animal as the initiator of sequences of actions also allows us to rethink the question of animal agentivity in captive settings.

Figure 5: Satheeshan removing the fluid from Shekharan's eyes.

Photo taken by the author.

31 Another instance of this haptic sociality was in how mahouts learn to overcome the fear of elephants as they are giant beings. To overcome the fear, mahouts are trained to walk in the space between the trunk and mouth of an elephant where the sensory organs are located, and therefore riskier for humans to access. Although not exactly a form of 'touch', walking through a primary sensory field such as between the trunk and the mouth involves an intense corporeal process that will not be permitted unless the elephant and his mahout are attuned to each other. Such forms of movement that are specific to human-elephant sociality also suggest what Chloe Mondeme defines as an overlooked dimension in interspecies relations, that some of these specific movements and faculties must have evolved through human-animal contacts in South Asia (Mondeme, 2020). To walk between the mouth and trunk of an elephant is not a mundane, categorised form of experience that is easily available to everyone. Neither is it possible for anyone to understand the perceptual nuances of this experience, including a researcher like me who spends a month studying human-elephant sociality. These are what Jason Throop, drawing from Levy, calls 'uncanny experiences' the supramundane feelings and sensations that are often not categorised and conceptually elaborated (Levy, 1973; Throop, 2005), but which exist in different cultures.

32 These kinesic and affective dimensions of interspecies sociality are moments that imbue a sense of vital connection with other life forms, and humans find joy in such relational, interactive possibilities (Smith, 2017). Human communal rituals such as music, theatre, sports, etc. often involve collective experiences of emotion and motion, through symbolic movements beyond the defines of speech (Ford, 2019). It is this ability to experience such feelings beyond human speech that has also enabled the human-elephant intracorporeal relation. Further, the relation between Satheeshan and Shekharan shows that animals actively enjoy and seek out such corporeal-affective moments of transcendence (Ford, 2019; Smith, 2017). These are, as Zigon writes, practices of fidelity and allegiance that shape moral commitments of attunement in human-elephant relations (Zigon, 2014).

The Uniqueness of the Elephant-Mahout Relation

33 Sensory perception is central to how we experience the world (Husserl, 1962; Csordas, 1994; Desjarlais and Throop, 2011) and as it is abundantly clear, humans and animals experience the world through distinct sensory modalities. Mahout Rajan pointed out the prominence of scent (*vaada*) in elephants' phenomenological engagement with the world. He said, 'Do you see how the elephant body is mostly behind its eyes? That means that the elephant cannot see its back or the space behind it unlike us. That is why they are given big ears. And the gift of scent (*vaada)*. When I come in the morning, it gets my smell. When we are at a festival, we need to be close to the elephant. Drop a mat and lie down next to him. The elephant knows the smell. When I open the gate here, the elephant knows'. Humans perceive the presence of elephants primarily through sight but also through sounds in the forest whereas elephants sense the world primarily through scent and hearing. We hug to display affection. An elephant greets with the trunk or puts the penis out and pees. It is at once strange and magical that each of us has a distinct smell that we humans unfortunately or fortunately cannot distinguish but which elephants are capable of detecting.

34 While humans and elephants are identified as similar in terms of emotional and social intelligence, the size of the brain etc. (Poole and Moss, 2008), it is the acknowledgement of sensorial differences that mattered to my informants. An attempt at living with an elephant emerges from the admission that we are different, much as how a person who cannot see studies the perception of a person with eyesight (Birch, 2022). In studying human-cat relationships, Kara White writes that to truly understand the cat from her own perspective, we not only need to 'see' the world from less than a foot off the floor, but we would also need to know what it is like to see clearly in the dark, to hear at an extended range, to judge the contours of a space from facial whiskers, etc. (White, 2013). Like a cat with a radically different way of relating to the world with her body, the elephant has a unique set of olfactory, tactile, and sonic perceptions through which it attunes to the environment around it. What does it mean to constantly recognise me and you through distinct scents? This is something we humans will perhaps never know. But as Csordas' somatic modes of attention go beyond visual attention, these engagements reveal the dominance of other sensorial ways of knowing and engaging with the world, and my informants' acknowledgment of this.

35 Beyond the anatomical and therefore sensorial differences, the uniqueness of each individual elephant was of great value to my informants. Often, when I asked about the

nature of elephants or mentioned my interest in human-elephant relations, a common response was that I will not understand the behaviour by looking at one elephant or one elephant-mahout relation as each elephant is unique and so is every relation. Lalita, who had a penchant for responding to my questions with questions, said 'everyone cannot be the same right?', sharing the implicit understanding that no two beings can be the same. This recognition of the uniqueness of each elephant is reminiscent of Throop's work on friendships (Throop, 2014) and his call to move beyond typification, beyond treating examples as illustrative of a broader pattern, but each being as distinct. Although understanding an elephant is not fully possible as we are not elephants, the recognition of this uniqueness and individuality of each elephant was understood to be central to a successful human-elephant relation. This became prominent when Nitheesh said:

> 'Each elephant has a *reethi* (a way of doing a certain thing). The mahout's skill lies in understanding them. When a mahout who practices on an easily listening elephant starts on a slow elephant and begins to poke and beat, then the trust will be lost, and they don't develop a good relation. If a teacher is short-tempered and gives imposition and homework every day, students will be stressed at the sight of the teacher.' – Nitheesh.

36 Nitheesh points to the way of doing things (*reethi*) to signify this individuality which was apparent during the fieldwork. Shekharan came across as a picky and disciplined eater. His eating practices were composed of little rituals including stacking an extra stem between his tusk as an act of saving his food from others whereas Krishnan elephant did not seem to have such strict rituals of eating. It is important how my informants recognise human ways and elephant ways as distinct ways of embodying and experiencing the world rather than as elephants' limitations of knowing the world. Given these differences, contextual perception and intuitive response become important to being a mahout. The set of linguistic commands, known as *vaaytharikal*, only provides the basic structure for human-elephant communication. What makes the relation unique according to my informants is the way of practice (*reethi/shaili*).

37 While Jason Throop writes on human friendships as a moral experience, my informants' acknowledgement of the uniqueness of each elephant, as beyond an example of a category, puts humans and elephants in a unique moral relation (Throop, 2014). This understanding of distinctions between species in terms of gestures, postures, and behaviour is what psychologist Kenneth Shapiro calls a phenomenological method of 'kinaesthetic empathy' (Shapiro, 1997).

38 Empathy is a multimodal process that not only involves perception and imagination but also the bodily, sensory, and tactile aspects of lived experience (Zahavi, 2002). Throop's work with the Yap community is significant in emphasising the primacy of other senses in shaping our experiences. For the Yaps, tactile-based empathy was central to discerning the experience of a patient's pain, given the notion of the opacity of mind (other minds are not knowable) among the Yap community (Throop, 2012). Evoking the primacy of visual and auditory sensory modalities in Western thought, Throop urges us to consider the significant role that other sensory modalities play in non-Western societies. As Throop suggests, such habitual ways of attending to others orient the humans and elephants to particular sensory modalities and to particular ways of being-in-the-world (Throop, 2012), where the recognition of the individuality of the elephant, almost as a human person, in itself allows a certain moral engagement with elephants.

39 The various sections in this chapter attempt to redirect the scholarly attention to human-elephant relations through a phenomenological and moral assemblage. The sensory and emotional subtleties of the relation, the maintenance of trust between an elephant and human that requires constant work, the allegiance with the elephant, and the uniqueness of each human-elephant relation point to the multiple ways in which humans and elephants engage in an attuned relationship where the everyday ways of being with elephants themself become an ontological condition for moral experience (Zigon, 2014). These ordinary-extraordinary relations suggest something else too. The epistemology of elephants as conceptualised by animal studies scholars and popular discourse is not very different from how my informants understand the elephant, where their intelligence, memory, social bonding etc., are acknowledged and valued. These narratives do not tell a story of pure torture or human exceptionalism but a story of exceptional humans and exceptional elephants.

FOOTNOTES

1. Set of linguistic commands used to communicate with elephants.

2. Used to express relief.

Conclusion

Satheeshan showed me a photoshopped picture of him next to a hippopotamus on his phone and said, 'if there are no more captive elephants, I will have to stand like this.' It was a joke and we both laughed. But if there is a next life and if Satheeshan is not around, then Satheeshan would prefer Shekharan elephant to remain in the forest.

1 For most of my informants, it wasn't the big debates on elephant captivity that mattered, but the local moralities emerging from the ordinary relations that they shared with their elephants. In his lecture 'The Anthropology of Trouble', Rappaport points to the cruciality of ethnography in making other discourses audible when they are made inaudible or unintelligible through the domination of privileged discourse, amplified further by mass media (Rappaport, 1993). Juxtaposing the dominant narratives—scientific, philosophical and activistic—that echo contemporary notions of what it means to be an elephant, this paper puts forward a missing piece – a grounded perspective on human-elephant relations. Concurring with Rappaport's outlook, this research argues that an ethnographic perspective into human-elephant entanglements through a phenomenological-moral approach makes for riveting viewpoints. Moving beyond moral totalities, as anthropologists who study ethics and morality urge us to do, the study investigates the phenomenologically attuned relationships between humans and elephants, suggesting that the ethical turn in anthropology can offer us an alternate path to conceptualising the human-elephant relation beyond the defines of torture. This paper also challenges the moral position in animal rights discourse—that elephants belong in the wild— by probing how the strict nature-culture, wild-domestic binaries dissolve into fuzzy continuums in the human-elephant milieu in Kerala. Although the paper finds the scholarly-activistic epistemology of elephant and the local epistemology of elephant as competing in terms of the diverging moral alignments they enable (such as whether elephants should live in forests or with humans), this research argues that both understandings of elephants are surprisingly convergent. The ways through which mahouts maintain an attuned relation with a giant being and attend to the sensory modalities of the elephant evidence that such a relationship is impossible without an understanding of elephant intelligence and an elephant's way of

being-in-the-world, in much the same way that animal studies and activistic discourse conceptualise elephants as highly intelligent beings.

2 The intention here, however, is not to make a moralising claim, such as to uphold human-elephant relations in Kerala and remain blind to the pitfalls that exist in the relationship. I agree with Zigon and Stoczkowski when they propound that anthropology is in danger of sacrificing epistemological values when the research is motivated by a moral-political commitment (Stoczkowski, 2008; Zigon, 2010). As this study has shown, mahout interests and elephant interests are not always complementary. Among the many reasons, the constant change of mahouts and drunk-driving were attributed to causing human-elephant conflict encounters, where a lack of attunement disrupts the instinctive reading of elephant cues, thus also showing that the claims of the animal rights discourse are not arbitrary but grounded in grave concerns that need addressing. Furthermore, some of the instances of the benign human-elephant relation that I describe in the third chapter could be how my informants reposition themselves amidst the popular discourse narratives.

3 While I acknowledge these complexities embedded in human-elephant sociality, what this paper does is slightly different. Instead of depending on a top-down, normative approach to morality to resolve consequential questions concerning whether the human-elephant relation is a bond defined by torture or whether the elephants belong to the wild or with humans, this paper advocates going beyond moral totalities to explore what a grounded gaze, a thick description that incorporates what the conceptual tools in the anthropology of morality and ethics can put forth, for a contextually nuanced understanding of moral assemblages through which humans and elephants entangle and attune a narrative that is missing in the big discussions on elephants. Beyond demonstrating what interspecies studies in anthropology can gain by dialoguing with the ethical turn, this paper makes far-reaching contributions in dissecting the big questions on the captivity of the cosmopolitan elephant, as many contemporary court cases show.[12]

FOOTNOTES

1. Animal Legal Defense Fund (2021) https://aldf.org/article/madras-high-court-uses-child-custody-approach-to-resolve-dispute-over-legal-ownership-of-elephant/ (accessed on 9 March 2023).

2. *The New Yorker* (2022), 'The Elephant in the Courtroom', https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/03/07/the-elephant-in-the-courtroom (accessed on 9 March 2023).

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