

Non-Human Citizens: Circus Elephants and Indian Law

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ABSTRACT

Like the poignant journey of Solomon, the Asian elephant in Jose Saramago's wonderful novel, *The Elephant's Journey*, I hope to chronicle some significant historical moments from the trails and travails of Indian circus elephants. Animals in circus bring to the fore a long tradition of animal trade, taming, training, and human accompaniment, raising significant questions regarding their acquisition, captive life, breeding and changing relation to forests and wilderness over the periods. They are inextricably linked with a colonial genealogy of the 'exotic' and 'exhibit', especially a flagship being like the elephant. India has a long history in taming and training elephants. Yet, we do not know much about elephants used for performance and entertainments.

Elephants do figure prominently in the wildlife policy of the nation as is evident from the project elephant (1992) and the Elephant Task Force (2010). In fact Asian elephant is the official symbol of Kerala State. But interestingly elephants did not figure in the list of animals banned from circus in the historical 1991 ban by the Environment Ministry of Government of India. We must bear in mind that even dogs made it onto that list. Memories of circus community form an important source for my research and narrations regarding elephants have been significant in these memories which disclose the complexity of human-animal relationships, the subjectivity of the animal and also the distinctive self-perceptions of the trainers which often we, social scientists fail to see.

Keywords: *circus elephants, performing elephants, elephants in entertainment, human-animal relationship, animal subjectivity*

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