

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

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ABSTRACT

Elephants being highly social mammals have been identified as a 'Natural Treasure' since ancient times in many Asian countries. Due to population increase and consequent loss of elephant natural habitat, human-elephant conflict (HEC) is now on the increase. Despite this, the elephant's presence in our religious and socio-cultural events has not diminished. According to *the Mahavamsa*, the *Great Chronicle of Sri Lanka*, King Pandu, of the City of Madhura in South India had sent through his daughter, elephants, horses and wagons to King Vijaya (2559-2521 BPE) as gifts for King Vijaya's Royal Consecration. According to *Mahavamsa*, there had been a state elephant kraal of King Devanampiyatissa (2323-2273 BPE). It is asserted that the King ordered to clear his elephant kraal to make room for those that would gather to listen to the Great Thera Mahinda preaching the Devadūta-suttanta. Elephants were also engaged to accompany theras, troops, chariots and in the construction of the monastery for bhikkhunis (Hatthalhaka-vihara). Likewise, the elephant *Kandula* became the companion of Dutugamunu (2177-2153 BPE), serving as his warrior elephant during the wars and for the decisive duel with King Elara that led to the unification of Sri Lanka. Later, elephants were also used by King Dutugemunu for the festival of enshrining relics in Ruvanveliseya at Anuradhapura. Our Kings have donated elephants to temples for religious festival traditions; such as for the annual Perahera of the Tooth Relic, the Tooth and the Bowl Relics and for troops and chariots from 4th to 16th century. The Modern Kandy Perahera dates back to the reign of King Kirthi Sri Rajasinghe (1747–1781 CE). During this time, the Tooth Relic was considered private property of the King, and the public was denied of the opportunity of venerating it. After the Kandyan Kingdom fell to the British in 1815, the custody of the Tooth Relic was handed over to the *Maha Sanga*. With the inauguration of the Kandy EsalaPerahera during this period, elephants were used for religious purposes and were also donated to temples on occasions.

Sri Lankan elephants are widely distributed from sea level to the highest mountain ranges. During the British rule, many bull elephants were killed by trophy hunters. Between 1829 and 1855 alone, more than 6,000 elephants were hunted down. However now, tourists who travel to Sri Lanka can enjoy watching and photographing elephants within national parks and in few other locations, the opportunity to go on elephant back safaris. The

intensity of HEC in Sri Lanka particularly in rural areas adjacent to elephant habitats, has been escalating and reports show that nearly 2,000 elephants have died during the past 15 years due to gunshot injuries, electrocution, illegal actions taken by farmers to protect their crops, land mines during the armed conflict, falling into unprotected agricultural wells and abandoned gem pits and collision with trains.

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

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