

The Close Relationship between the Tusker and Buddhism

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Devpura atheki - Kumbu dahasayaki

Diga dala ataki - sath gabaki

-Gajaga Wannama-

Introduction

Asian elephants are long-living mammals who live for sixty years. They are highly intelligent and also extremely sociable and stay in groups. These mammals has had a close relationship with man over centuries serving as work animals and playing an important role in religious and cultural history.

Elephant is called in Sinhala as 'Aliya'. The tusker is called in Sinhala either 'Atha' or 'Gajaga'. The tusker had being the basis for a lot of engravings, paintings, tales, traditional dances and in Peraheras.

The main objective of this paper is to survey the relation between the tusker and Buddhism. The Jathaka tales were the main sources referred in this survey.

Previous Research

Dhanesh Wisumperuma had written an article on '*Religious Use of Elephants in Ancient Sri Lanka*'. He had paid his attention on his article towards the role of elephants in cultural history and Buddhist religious use and elephant donations in Sri Lanka. However he had mainly based his article on elephant use in perahera. He had also written an article to the *Endangered Elephants: Past Present and Future* in 2004. The article was under the topic of '*Human-Elephant Relationships in Sri Lanka: an historical and archaeological perspective*'.

Biology

Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) belongs to the *Elephantidae* family. They are one of the largest mammals on earth. There are four subspecies of Asian elephant such as Borneo, Sumatra, Sri Lanka and South Asia.

Compared to their African relatives, the Asian elephant is slightly smaller, display less sloping back, has smaller and rounded ears and its head region constitutes the highest part of the body (Elephant 2016).

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The Asian elephant is a creature averaging 2.5m to 3m in height and 5.5m to 6.4m in length with males being some what larger than females. Their stocky body is supported by stout pillar-like legs, yet the feet consist of reduced phalanges resting on pads of elastic tissue that permit this gigantic mammal to walk very quietly. Skin covering is thick, dry and essentially hairless apart from a few sparse bristles. Skin colour varies from dark grey to brown, although patches of pink may be visible on the forehead, ears, base of the trunk, and or chest. The characteristic of the trunk is formed from elongation of nose and upper lip and it function as a versatile tool for breathing, drinking, bathing, manipulating objects, and communicating. In males, a pair of incisors may become elongated into tusks that grow an average of 17m per year through out the mammal’s life time. Asian females possess only small tusks which seldom become distinguishable from their upper lips (Elephant 2016).

Tusker Mentioned in Buddhist History

The association of elephants with Buddhism dates back to the beginning of Buddhism in 6th to 5th century BCE. Elephants are associated with stories of the life of Lord Buddha. In the story of birth of Siddhartha Gouthama, the queen Maya had seen a dream of a calf tusker who come to her with a white lotus and entered her abdomen. When they inquire the dream following day, they got to know that queen Maya was expecting a child.

The story of Nalagiri Damanaya also reveals the tusker called Nalagiri who ran to the Lord Buddha to kill him. But the Buddha had him tamed by the great kindness of Lord Buddha. Nalagiri is also called as Danapala and the tale is mentioned in *Swarna Karkataka Jathaka* in Jathaka tales (j;af;ajej” 2005).

The tusker called Parileyya had offered essential needs to the Lord Buddha when he was in meditation in Prileyya jungle. The story of Parileyyaka is mentioned in *Bisa Jathaka* as well as *Kusa Jathaka* in Jathaka tales (වත්තවත්ත 2005).

Tuskers are featured in a number of Jathaka tales (The stories related to previous births of the Buddha). The ‘Pansiya panas Jathaka’ was written in Kurunegala period. It includes the stories of the previous life of Lord Buddha. There were around five hundred fifty tales in Pansiya panas Jathaka. Among them over twenty tales mention elephants. The most interested feature is always it is a tusker. Here is the list of Jathaka tales which mention elephants.

- Mahila Mukha Jathaka

“*Baranesa Bambadath rajuge Mahila Mukha nam magul athu...*”

“The royal tusker called Maila Mukha of king Bambadath of Baranasi...”

- Abhinha Jathaka

“*Atha saha mithra sunakhaya...*”

“The tusker and his friend dog...”

- Kulawaka Jathaka
“... *athun lawa pagawa maradamana lesa ana kaleya.*”
“... Ordered to be trampled to death.”
- Thiththira Jathaka
“*Mahanugak asurehi watu, wanduru, ath yahaluwo thidenek viya.*”
“There were three friends; a watu bird, a monkey and a tusker by a huge Nuga tree”
- Seelawanaga (Raja) Jathaka
“*Bosathano athekuwa ipida sudu sirura athiwa athun asudahak piriwara...*”
“The Bodisathwa born as a tusker who was white in colour followed by eighty thousand tuskers...”
- Bhiimasena Jathaka
“*Bhiimasena athu pita rana bhoomiyata yama...*”
“The Bhiimasena goes to the war on a back of the tusker...”
- Durawalakashta Jathaka
“*Brahmadaththa raju thama magula athu athun purudu karana guruwarunta bhara dunha.*”
“King Brahmadaththa handed over his royal tusker to the trainers who train tuskers”
- Dumedha Jathaka
“*Rajagahanuwra magada nam rajekuge kalaye bosathano sudu ath kulayaka ipida mangala hasthiya wii...*”
“The Bosath had born in to a white tusker herd and become the royal tusker of the king called Magada in Rajagahanuwara”
- Panchagaruka Jathaka
“*Gandara raju athu piti nuwara sancharaya karaddi...*”
“When king of Gandara travels on the back of the tusker...”
- Aliinachiththa Jathaka
“*Maha athek kihiri ulak ani wedana barawa...*”
“A big tusker suffered from the pain of being stuck by a kihiri point...”
- Susiima Jathaka
“*Baranesa susiima rajuge purohiatha bamuna ath lakshana dena ath yaga kota kotiganan dhnaya upayai.*”
“The adviser of the king Susiima of Baranesa knew the signs of tuskers and had earned a lot of money by doing tusker oblations”

- Sangamawachara Jathaka
“Ithala warshawen sathuru rajuge magul athu pasu basinnata wiya.”
 “The royal tusker of enemy king retreated because of the arrow shower.”
- Manichora Jathaka
“Baranes raja swarnabaranayen serasi athu pita nagi...”
 “The king of Baranes wore gold jewelleryes and sat on the back of the royal tusker “
- Kelisiila Jathaka
“Kridaloli Babadath raju athun asun gon ratha dutu wita...”
 “When the sporty king Bambadath saw the carts used by tuskers, horses and bulls... “
- Kasawa Jathaka
“Bambadath raju samaye bosathhu athekuwa athun piriwara wanayehi wasathi”
 “Bosath was be a tusker and lived in the jungle with the tuskers, when the period of king Bambadath”
- Thirita Jathaka
“Brahmadaththa raju athu pitin wanayehi manmulawa...”
 “The king Brahmadaththa was lost in the jungle when travelling on the back of the tusker..”
- Kurudharma Jathaka
“Athu pitin ehi pemina dana sanwidhanaya kota...”
 “Arranged arms giving by coming on the back of the tusker..”
- Gootapani Jathaka
“... AtheK pemina duganda deni apasu yannata heruneya.”
 “...a tusker came and turn back to go, smelling stinking air.”
- Upahana Jathaka
“Bambadath raja samaye bosathano hathyacharya kulayaka upannaha.”
 “The Bosath born to a cast of teacher for tusker in the period of king Bambadath.”
- Karkataka Jathaka
“Bambadath raja samaye wileka maha kakuluwek wilata basna athunge pa anduwen kapa marana hein aththu diyata nobasa athera giyaha.”
 “The tuskers drop the lake without getting into the water as a big crab which was in the lake was cutting the legs of the tuskers with its cutters in the period of king Bambadath.”
- Mahisa Jathaka
“Sellakkara wandurek hile athekuge kumbasthalayata pena sellam kirimata purudu wiya.”

“A playful monkey had used to play on the back of a tusker.”

- Jambuka Jathaka

“*Obata ayasa nokota gos mama atheku maragena ka jeewth wemi kiiya.*”

“It says that I will kill a tusker and live eating it without troubling you.”

- Latukika Jathaka

“*Baranesa bambadath nam rajeku dawasa bosathhu athwa upannaha.*”

“Bosath was born as a tusker in Baranesa in the period of king Bambadath.”

- Swarna Karkataka Jathaka

“*Anada thera dhanapala athu idiriyata pena...*”

“Anada thero jumped in front to the tusker called Dhanapala...”

- Mathuposaka Jathaka

“*Maha sudu ath rajek thama anda maniyanta upasthana karamin himala wanayehi wisuha.*”

“A huge white tusker lived in the Himalaya taking care of its mother.”

- Wessanthara Jathaka

“... *Pan wath kota ali athu pawadi...*”

“... The white tusker handed over by pouring water...” (වත්කෝවැව 2005)

Elephants are massively used in Peraharas, but a tusker is always used to carry the casket. For example, the ‘*Asela Perahera*’ in Kandy always uses a tusker to carry the sacred relic (Wisumperuma, 2012). In the ‘*Samandewala Perahera*’ a tusker is always used to carry the casket of the tooth relic (<http://exploresrilanka.lk> 2016).

There is a carving of playing tuskers on the rock behind one of the pools of Isurumuniya.



fig.1 Carvings at Isurumuniya (www.srilankatravelguide.lk)

Exception to this is tuskers used in carvings. The people used to build an ‘Ath weta’ or ‘Ath pawura’ (Tusker wall) around many sacred places. The surface of the *Pana bemma* of Ruwanweli seya was decorated by tuskers. The head, front legs and the body of the tuskers were exposed. It

seems that the stupa was cared for by the tuskers. According to the *mahawamsa*, the *ath pawura* is also included in the work list to complete in Mahathupa (Ruwanweli seya) by king Saddhathissa (පරණවිතාන 2009).



fig.2 Pana bemma of Ruwanweli seya (පරණවිතාන 2009)

Conclusion

Tusk is a rare condition among Asian elephants, according to the zoologists. Tuskers had always been used in tales of Buddha's life, Jathaka tales as well as carvings and paintings in temples and religious festivals such as *Perahera*.

According to religious belief, becoming Buddha avoiding *Klesha* is a difficult thing and it is also considered a rare condition. The people might compare the rareness of the tusker to the Buddha. This is not the only comparison made between a natural phenomenon and Buddha. The lotus flower is also compared to the Buddha. Lord Buddha had born and bred among humans and after understanding the truth and releasing all desire (*Klesha*), he had become the Buddha; more than a human similar to a lotus bud created in the mud, grows through the water, finally coming out of the water and blossoming without touching the water. The same routine might have happened with the tusker. The tusker is also an elephant but it is also more than an elephant because of the tusks.

Therefore, since ancient times, Buddhists have used the tuskers for many religious purposes as mentioned above.

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