

Characteristics of Asian Elephants from Ancient Sanskrit Texts

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Introduction

Many ancient Sanskrit texts – may those be the treatises on Elephant-science or veterinary treatises or may those be the treatises on Statecraft or encyclopedias – discuss the characteristics of elephants and classification as per those characteristics in their own way. The present paper compiles all these treatises and presents observations based on these facts found in ancient texts.

Characteristics of Elephants in Ancient Zoological Text Mrgapaksisastra

Mrgapaksisastra (Mr Pasâ) is a treatise by HaAsadeva that deals with the characteristics, types, habits, life-span etc. of many animals including elephants. The text is divided into two parts: animals and birds. The sixth section of its first part named GajaguGâdivarGana (Discussion of the qualities of elephants) is on elephants.¹

The text discusses thirteen types of elephants and accordingly gives their characteristics. These types are:

1. Dantin: This type of elephants have blue colour and big tusks. They are six *hastas*² in height. Their body is fat and the tail is long. They have long feet and fatty penis. Their voice is sweet and eyes are beautiful. They are very little interested in mating. This type of animals walk slowly but steadily. They are devoid of anger and can bear big loads. They can be trained easily and are skillful in work. They are very brave. The name Dantin given to this type seems appropriate due to their big tusks. It appears from these characteristics that this type of animals are very good for domestication as they can be employed to carry big loads. Since they are brave they can be used in battles.
2. Dantâvala: Elephants of this type are of huge body-structure and are black in colour. They have two separate globes. Their head is big. They move fast. They have a habit of moving their two feet. They become happy with the monsoon. They like to play in waters and mud. They are fond of fights and mating. They eat a lot and their memory is strong. If beaten they get annoyed. But when they are trained they become submissive. They are brave on proper occasions. Thus this type of elephants seem good for domestication and also better for use in battles.
3. Hastin: Elephants of this type have beautiful bodies. Their eyes quiver. They have a big penis. In their youth they have low must. They are fond of mating. Their gait is slow. They remember previous hatred. They are not so brave. They are fond of music. They like to play in waters, sand and mud. They can be employed to work only if they are trained. It seems from these qualities that

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when trained these type of animals may be useful in processions etc. instead of warfare.

4. Dvirada: Probably the name Dvirada is given to this class of elephants because of their two white tusks. The animals are black in colour, short-heighted and have big trunk with beautiful body-structure. Their temples are huge. They take deep breath. The gait of these elephants is slow. They make deep sound. The animals are timid and get tired with small amount of work. They always attack and get easily annoyed. Still stay in the command of their driver. They like decorations. This type of elephants also seem useful for domestication.
5. Gaja: Elephants of this type have huge body-structure and blue colour. They have a soft skin. Their belly is big. They are always in a must state. They have red spots on their face especially in youth. Their tusks are little blackish. They move their long and big trunks frequently. Their eyes are beautiful. Their voice is sweet. Their gait is fast like an arrow. They are very brave and are not cheaters. They are free from pride or anger. They are much interested in mating. They have a long life-span. They are under control of the drivers.
6. Bhadrageja: Elephants of this type are tall and huge. Their trunks are long and eyes are bright and beautiful. They have red spots on the tip of the trunk; and white and red spots on their face. They have auspicious circles on their bodies. They are frequently in the state of must. They have auspicious body-smell. Their voice is sweet. Their gait is steady and fast. This type of elephants are intelligent and by nature are forgiving. They can be easily captured and are under good control of their drivers. They can be easily put to work. The elephants of this type can prove victorious and wealth-giving to the kings. This class is probably called Bhadra because of the auspicious signs of the animals. Therefore such animals are prescribed to be used the time of king's coronation.
7. Mandageja: Elephants of this type are dwarf but have very fatty body-structure with blue colour. Their eyes are like those of lions. The tip of the trunk has red spots. Their hooves are long and sturdy. This class of elephants are intelligent, have less anger are in general quiet. They remember what is taught to them. They do not like to work. They are fond of bananas, grass and sugarcane. They cannot be easily captured in youth and are full of desire for mating, especially with a virgin cow-elephant. They are skillful at war-times. They can bear loads. They are brave and are fond of hunting.
8. Mrgageja: Elephants of this type have thin body-parts. Their tusks are also thin. Their feet are long; eyes are big; tail is short. Their colour is smoky. They have bad smell. Their minds are unsteady and nature is angry. Sometimes due to their unsteady nature, they flee at the time of work.
9. Samkîmagaja: Elephants of this class have all the good qualities of Bhadra, Manda and Mrga classes. As they are easily controlled and are auspicious, the kings are recommended to keep elephants of this type.
10. Matangaja: These elephants are blue and black in colour; have a huge body-structure and fast gait. They have white and red spots. They like to move their trunks. They are fond of breaking the trees.

¹ Cf. Citampallî and BhātakhaGe (1993: 34–49)

They are intelligent, forgiving, quiet and brave. In youth they are proud and have fast gait like an arrow. They are fond of mating with a virgin cow. They like to play in water. They are good for mounting.

11. Padmin: These elephants like to bathe in water-pools full with water-lilies. They smell like flowers. They are fond of music and gazing at creepers. The elephants which are fond of sitting in shadows are called Padmins. They need less training, and easily controlled. They are skillful at work and are intelligent. They can bear hunger and thirst. They do not possess any bad qualities and are auspicious. They are prescribed for use in hunting.

12. Ibha: Elephants of this type are of medium size and are black in colour. They are difficult to capture. They are useful in battles because they get annoyed easily. They can be used for trampling the enemy and are prescribed to be kept on the warfront.

13. Stamberama: Elephants of this type are short, soft, blue-coloured, with good smell. They eat less. It is believed to be auspicious to pass through their shadow. They possess all those virtues that are suitable for domestication and while they are kept in captivity. They lack all bad qualities.

Characteristics of Elephants in Mâtangalîlâ

Mâtangalîlâ (ML) is a text on Elephant-science. At ML 1.27–30, we come across the types of Elephants. The author of ML, Nîlakantha gives only four types³, namely Bhadra, Manda, Mrga and Samkîma with the characteristics more or less matching with those in the MrPasa. Then Nîlakantha mentions other types as designations of elephants. However, rather than describing the characteristics as separate types, he deals with these words etymologically. Unlike MrPasâ, which deals with the characteristics of all types of elephants in details, it appears that the ML discusses only those types of elephants that are useful for domestication and are owned by the kings for statecraft. In the second section ML, we read the characteristics of elephants from the point of view of their auspiciousness. The best type of elephant has six elevated parts: two temples, two tusks, back and backbone.⁴ He is dark in colour and has soft body. His tip of trunk, lip, palate, tongue, ears, anus and penis are red in colour. He has spots on the body making different auspicious marks. A good elephant has twenty nails. His right tusk is bigger than the other. His trunk and tail are long, strong and straight. His penis is like a rod. His joints of legs are invisible and spines are well-concealed. He has broad ears, forehead and jaws. The author also talks about auspicious and inauspicious sounds made by elephants. Elephants having the qualities opposite to what has been described above are rendered as bad quality elephants. In addition, the one who is deficient in must, the one with defective tusks is also considered as bad elephant.

² Hasta is a measure of length from the elbow to the tip of the middle finger. One hasta is equal to 18 inches.

³ These four types can be found in almost all the texts referred here. The lexicon *AbhidhânacintâmaGî* mentions the same at 4.1218.

⁴ Cf. ML 2.1.

In its 8th section, ML describes the character of elephants based on their physical and mental characteristics. Elephants are classified as Gods, Demons, Gandharvas, Yaksas, Pisâcas and Nâgas and similar to four classes of men they are classified as Brahmanas, Ksatriyas, Vaisyas and sudras. The characteristics on which these classes are based appear somewhat mythical resembling the characteristics of the classes whose names are given to them. E.g. the elephants belonging to the God class have the character similar to that of Gods such as possessing fragrant body, forever youth, shining face, sweet voice and so on. The ML also makes seven categories of elephants depending on their response to goading. These are Atyartha, Uttâna, Gambhîra, Anvartha, Pratyartha, Karkasa and Siddha.⁵ Atyartha type of elephant is extremely sensitive and trembles when merely touched. Uttâna type of elephant feels the sensitivity when the goad comes in contact with the skin or body-hair. Gambhîra type of elephant feels sensation when the goad pierces his flesh. Anvartha type of elephant responds to the signs driver's feet or touch of goad and acts accordingly as desired. The Pratyartha type of elephant acts contrary to the signal. The Karkasa type of elephant is difficult to control and does not respond to goading. Siddha type of elephant is the one who is well-controlled.

Thus, in the ML, we come across the characteristics of good and bad elephants in brief but complete manner.

Characteristics of Elephants in Brhatsamhitâ

The Brhatsamhitâ (BrS) deals with the characteristics of elephants in its 67th chapter. Here we see the four types as described in the ML, Bhadra, Manda, Mrga and Samkîrna. The characteristics of all these types of elephants are same as those discussed in the MrPasâ and ML.

Characteristics of Elephants in Kaumilîya Arthauâstra

The Kaumilîya Arthauâstra (KA) is a treatise on statecraft. While discussing the qualities of elephant managers, trainers and drivers, it only mentions the four types of elephants, Bhadra, Manda, Mrga and Samkîrna because the elephant managers are supposed to know them for their maintenance.⁶ At KA 2.31.17–18, we see the characteristics of elephant which may become a good mount. These characteristics are similar to those mentioned at ML 2.1. At 2.32.6, Kaumilya mentions eight characteristics of elephants used in warfare. These are Âcarana (one who is led), Kuñjaraupavâhya (who is ridden with the help of another elephant), Dhorana (trotting), Âdhânagatika (trained in various gaits), Yastyupavâhya (ridden with a stick), Totropavâhya (ridden with a goad), suddhopavâhya (ridden without any help) and Mârgayuka (used for hunting). At 2.32.8–10, he states the classification of bad elephants based on their characteristics. Here, by bad elephant (Vyâla), Kaumilya means an elephant who refrains from duty due to several reasons. The types of bad elephant are suddha (possessing eighteen defects), Suvrata (possessing fifteen defects), Vicama (possessing thirty-three defects) and Sarvadosapradusta (possessing fifty-two defects).

⁵ Cf. ML 8.18–25.

⁶ Cf. KA 2.31.11.

Contemporary Knowledge about Characteristics

In the modern era, all these characteristics to examine good or bad elephants are followed as per the descriptions of ancient texts. Edgerton, (1931:9ff) quotes from the modern works by Sanderson and Evans noting the facts of native Indian and Burmese drivers' beliefs about examination of elephants by their good and bad characteristics. Similarly, Edgerton (1931:11) discusses four castes of elephants that have come down till today with slightly different names. Bedi (1969: 9–10) informs us about modern classification of elephants into two broad species, African and Asian. While comparing these two he gives the characteristics of both the species. The characteristics of Indian elephants match with those mentioned in ancient literature. Bedi (1969: 88–90) mentions beliefs about auspicious and inauspicious marks that are still prevalent among the elephant managers of the present day. All these are the same as mentioned in ancient texts.

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