

## Depictions of Elephants in Ancient Indian Manuscripts

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### Introduction

The elephant enjoys a special status in the country and represents the Indian culture in many ways. It has been very closely associated with the religion, mythology, history and cultural heritage of India for centuries. The elephant is always regarded as sacred in all the three religious systems of India i.e. Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Since elephant is one of the most powerful members of the animal kingdom, it has always attracted the attention of humankind. Elephant lore has long antiquity and India has a fascinating history of domesticating wild elephants. It has always played a prominent role in the lives of their rulers. Indian kings made use of elephants from very early times, partly for ceremonial display, partly as an important component of the four-fold army (the others being infantry, cavalry, and chariots). According to the ancient Indian records, the elephant was one of the integral parts of the army and the strength of an army and its success in the war was depended on the number of brave, mighty and well-equipped elephants led by able *mahouts* (elephant-riders). The Indian rulers placed great reliance on the elephants. They crowned them as the virtual king of the battle field, as the elephants rendered valuable service in war. Like other subjects of importance for royal courts, study or knowledge of elephantology is an important branch of the *Arthaśāstra*, the science of statecraft or government. Accordingly, in ancient days it became an essential branch of royal education. The importance of elephants in war made their management very important for kings and a lot of literature on elephant capture, training, and aspects of elephant husbandry came into existence. Knowledge about the elephant was first depicted in art, passed on through oral traditions and recorded in several texts since ancient times. The elephant is depicted in several Indian manuscripts and treatises. Most of the copies of the manuscripts available today are corrupt and incomplete. Ancient literature such as the *Zgveda* (1500-1000 B.C.) and the *Upanicadas* (900-500 B.C.) contain many references to trained elephants. Vedic literature also confirms that by the sixth century BCE, the taming and catching of elephants had become quite an advanced art (Bist et al. 2001)

### *Hastyāyurveda* of Sage Palakappya

*Hastyāyurveda* of sage Palakappya is written in the form of a discourse that took place between him Romapada, the King of Anga; it deals with diseases related to elephants and their remedies as well as elephant behaviour. Palakappya is the first and the earliest author on elephantology. According to

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Indian myths, he was from the epic period and was a contemporary of King Dasharatha of Ramayana. Some scholars believe that *Dhanvantari* (the father of Indian surgery) and Palakappya were one and the same person. The work concerns the care of captive elephants and was written down in the fifth or fourth century BCE. Palakappya praises the elephants as the best vehicle for kings, as best fighters in the army and as an ornament of the army. He says where there are elephants there is victory. He gives further details as to what sort of men should be appointed by kings as the minister-in-charge of elephants (*Gajāmātya*) and refers to the qualities of the physicians for elephants (Bhattacharya, 1924). It contains deep and profound discussions about the origin of the elephant, disorders in its bodily components, causes, symptoms and nature of diseases, methods of treatment, preparation, use and measure of medicines to be applied depending on age of the elephant, nature and climate, food, swelling place etc.; instructions for suitable food and drink, care and precautionary measure to be taken to keep elephants organized, strong and free from ailments (Bujarbarua, 1979). It has 12,000 verses in 160 chapters dealing with elephant medicine and surgery. It is further divided into four sections called *Mahārogaśmāna* (about the major or critical diseases covering 18 chapters); *Kśudrarogaśmāna* (about minor diseases covering 72 chapters); *Śalyaśmāna* (about the surgery and anatomy covering 34 chapters); and *Umhatasśmāna* (about the general up keep, the feeding of elephants and medicinal preparations covering 36 chapters).

### ***Gaja Śāstra* of Sage Palakappya**

*Gaja Śāstra* work is attributed to sage Palakappya, who belongs to the epic period. It is a treatise relating to the science of elephants and written completely in verse form. In this work the puranic version of the origin of elephants, their physical and mental qualities, their auspicious and inauspicious marks, determination of their age, various stages of their life, measurements of their body, the odours and colour of their musth or rut, pattern of their gait, their anatomical and various kinds of castes or species are fully and clearly described. In addition to these the methods of catching, rearing, and treatment for ailments are also dealt with in an elegant way (Mahadik, 1952).

### ***Mātangalīla* of Nilakantha**

*Mātangalīla* of Nilakantha is a short treatise on elephants written in the eighth century and describes the stages of growth of the animal and the food given to it. This work with 253 verses, is divided into twelve chapters, each called *pamala*. The origin of the elephant as well as sage Palakappya, auspicious and inauspicious marks, marks of longevity, stages from infancy to very old age, price or valuation criteria for an elephant, standard measurement protocols for each class of elephants, signs of physical and mental characters, different stages of musth, behavioural changes during musth, ichor, methods of capturing wild elephants, daily and seasonal duties for the elephant and the essential qualities and skills to be possessed by elephant keepers are the topics described in the respective twelve chapters (Cheeran, 2013).

### ***Arthaśāstra* of Kautilya**

The earlier literature reveals that kings and senior administrators were duly instructed about the art of handling elephants and about various aspects of their physiology and health. Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra* (300 BCE to 300 CE) therefore deals with capture, keeping, care and training of elephants in its two chapters. In these sections there is a reference to the duties of the overseer of elephants to take care of their training. It prescribes the setting up of elephant sanctuaries on the border of the kingdom that were to be patrolled by guards and further clarifies that anyone killing an elephant within the sanctuary would be put to death. It also prohibits the capturing of elephant calves, tusk-less bulls or those with small tusks, and diseased elephants. During the reign of Emperor Ashoka (273-232 BCE) the elephant became the symbol of Buddhism. The Ashokan edicts refer to the setting up of hospitals for the treatment of elephants and other animals (Bist et al. 2001).

### ***Mānasollasa* by King Somesvara III**

*Mānasollasa* by King Somesvara III Cālukya, composed in 1131 CE, deals with the lore relating to taming of elephants. It also deals with staged elephant fights, which was a major entertainment of kings. It reinterprets the list of elephant forests by extending the boundaries southward. Eight forests as the dwelling places of the elephant are named and five methods of capturing the wild elephant are recommended by Somesvara.

### ***Yaśastilakacampu* by Somadevasuri**

*Yaśastilakacampu* is composed by Somadevasuri in 10<sup>th</sup> century CE. It contains a good amount of information about the importance laid on the elephant and the culture of the elephant science in the society of its time. The work concentrates rather more on the importance of elephants in the royal household than on the usual need of the general people. The strength and prestige of the state depends on the force of the elephant troops, and the elephant wing of defense is considered the most powerful of the four wings of the armed forces, viz. cavalry, infantry, elephants and chariots. It is also regarded as the best vehicle. It destroys the enemy in the battle with its eight weapons viz. the two tusks, the trunk, the four feet and the tail (Bujarbarua, 1979).

### ***Yuktikalpataru* of Bhoja**

As many as 76 verses in the 103<sup>rd</sup> chapter of *Yuktikalpataru* are devoted to the science of elephant relating to different aspects like counting the auspicious moments for riding them for a journey, the characteristics of eight ancestors of elephants and their races, classification of the same into different groups regarding their birth, castes, auspicious marks or good qualities, inauspicious marks and their result, and so on. It is, in fact, a work on statecraft and architecture and is attributed to Bhoja, the celebrated king of Paramara Dynasty, who reigned in Dhara during the period of 1005-1054 CE. (Bujarbarua, 1979).

## ***Śukranītīsāra* of Sukracharya**

The *Śukranītīsāra* of Sukracharya enables us to know the influence of the elephant on royal life. The elephant specially played a very important role in the time of war and used to be preferred as a vehicle of prestige in the society. The owner of the elephant, known as Gajapati, was to learn all about the elephant, its different castes, peculiarities, diseases and treatment and to have knowledge about the different limbs of the body of the elephant, such as the palate, the tongue, and the nails. Sukracharya gives a four-fold classification of elephants. He discusses the signs of the auspicious and inauspicious elephants. The fixation of price is also discussed clearly in this work (Bujarbarua, 1979).

## ***BrhatsaAhitā* by Varahamihira**

Varahamihira (587 CE.) in his *BrhatsaAhitā* describes the characteristic marks of different types of elephants in chapters 67 and 94, known as *Hastilakṣana* and *Hastingitā* respectively. The chapter on *Hastilakṣana* contains account of elephants in relation to their divisions into castes, nature, characteristics peculiar to each group, signs of good and auspicious elephants and that of bad and inauspicious ones, colour and odours of ichor produced by different kinds of elephants and auspicious and inauspicious indications of different types of elephants. The chapter on *Hastingitā* presents elaborately the portents conveyed by the elephants to their owners. These portents are gathered from the spots found in the elephant's tusks as they are cut, from sounds and secretion that come out from its body, from the habitual movements and the behaviour of the elephant (Bujarbarua, 1979).

## ***Nītīsāra* by Kamadaka**

Kamandaka wrote *Nītīsāra* between 450 and 550 CE. He writes that the king should maintain elephant forests for ensuring the supply of war elephants. He suggests various sorts of *vyuhas* (battle formations) to be adopted in the battlefield - in between other army forces of infantry, cavalry and chariots elephant's army is positioned in the rear position in *Achalvyuha*, in the front in *Apratihavyuha*, to the center in *Madhyavedhivyuha*, and in two wings at the front in *Antvhidvyuha* (Coetzee, 2013).

## ***Agnipurāna* of Vaiṣṇava Sect**

*Agnipurāna* is a work belonging to Vaiṣṇava Sect and examines the nature and characteristics of various animals in its 287<sup>th</sup> chapter. In this course the elephant is taken into account where it illustrates the points of excellence and ailments suffered by the domestic elephants. It prescribes colour, strength, general build, the speed, the roundness of the physique; inclinations for fighting, power of endurance are the seven qualities to be marked at the time of accepting an elephant (Bujarbarua, 1979).

### Naradamuni's *Gajasiksā*

Naradamuni's *Gajasiksā* talks about mythological origins of elephants, characteristics of twenty eight varieties of elephants found on earth, their height, colour, the places where they are found and their dispositions. It gives an account of the movements of the elephants and the good omens that predict an easy catch for the adventurers. It describes the methods of catching the elephants, bringing the elephants caught from the forests to the city of the king. The desirable qualities of the *mahouts* are also described in it. An elaborate description of the construction of various kinds of abode places for elephants and quarters for the *mahouts* finds a place here. It throws light on the various traits, features, growth and behaviour of elephants in different age groups. This is followed by the details of the various phases of training in their course. It is composed in the form of teachings imparted to Indra-Vasava by Narada (Sarma, 1975).

### *Gajagrahanaparakāra (Gaja-samgrahana-prakāra) of Narayana Diksita*

*Gajagrahanaparakāra* of Narayana Diksita deals with the methods of catching elephants by *khedāh śikār* and training of the wild elephants. The work contains 881 verses in the Arya metre and is divided into 5 chapters called *āsvāsa*. The first chapter in 29 verses praises the role of elephants as auspicious animals useful for work, protection and war. The next chapter in 345 verses describes ten methods of capturing wild elephants. The third chapter consisting of 49 verses enumerates the places and regions where elephants are found. The fourth chapter deals with the training of the captured elephants and contains 241 verses and the last chapter in 217 verses tells us how an exhibition of elephants is to be conducted every year for evaluating their worth and for the entertainment and instruction of the public (Sarma, 1964).

Besides the above works there are other works available on elephants in Sanskrit such as the *Gaja Vaidyam*, *Gajanirupana*, *Gajacikitsā* or *Gajalakcana*. *Gajalakcana* is also in the form of discourse between King Nahuca and Brhaspati. A passage in *Carakasanhitā* (Siddismhāna, XI, 20-26) contains a list of ingredients for preparing enemas for elephants and other domestic animals (Mazars, 1994). Rajaputra (Buddha) also contributed to elephant studies but the work is not available anywhere. *Gajaśāstram* and *Gajalakcana Cikitsā* by Vyasa and his disciple Vaishampayana give an account of the science of elephants and treatment of the different ailments of the elephants. The Western Ganga kings Durvinita (8<sup>th</sup> century CE.) is credited with a work on *Gajaśāstra* and Sivamara II (788-816 CE.) is known to have written *Gajamātā Kalpanā*. The encyclopedic work *Abhilasitārthacintāmani*, attributed to the Kalyani Cālukya King Somesvara III (1126-38 CE.) enumerates the different types of forests having elephants, and describes the methods of catching and training them. In the *Hariharacaturangam* of Godavara Misra, a court poet of Prataparudra Gajapati (1497-1541 CE.) from Odhisa, the very first chapter consisting of as many as 313 verses, is devoted entirely to the various aspects of the elephant science. The *Śivatattvaratnākara* attributed to the Keladi chief Basava or Basappa Nayaka (1694-1714 CE.) of the Kannada country, describes the length of body and various types of elephants (Sarma, 1975). One chapter in it is devoted to elephants and their medical treatments (Mazars, 1994). *Gajāyurveda* was commissioned by King Amar Singh

II of Mewar and was written by Bhattakrishnadasa in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century with beautiful Mewar style illustrations on the reverse side of each folio.

There also exist several regional texts on elephants in vernacular languages such as *Gajācmaka* (a hundred verses in Kannada), a work on elephant management, known to have been written by Western Ganga King Shivamara II (788-816 CE.). It is now considered lost. Western Ganga King Sripurusha (726–788) wrote a treatise on elephants in Kannada called *Gajāśāstra*. The *Lokopakārā* of Chavundaraya II (in Kannada), a poet scholar of Karnataka in court of Jayasimha II (1015-1042 CE.) also gives information about elephants.

The *Gaja Śāstra Sāra*, a work in Marathi by Rakmaji Pundit completed in 1812, was written on the instruction of King Serfoji II (1798-1832) to serve as a guide and instruction manual for his son, Shivaji II, the last king of Tanjavur. The text borrows heavily from earlier treatises on elephants – *Gaja Śāstra* and *Palakappya* by Palakappya Muni, King Serfoji's *Gaja Śāstra Basā Prabandha* and Vaishampayan's *Gaja Śāstra*. These and other rare manuscripts on elephants are found in Saraswati Mahal Library, Tanjavur.

### ***Hastividyārnava* by Sukumar Barkaith**

*Hastividyārnava* by Sukumar Barkaith was commissioned under the patronage of Ahom King Siva Singh (1713-1744 CE.) and his queen consort Phuleswari. It deals with the management and care of elephants in the royal stables. Two artists Dilbar and Dosai painted the manuscript. It contains description of several kinds of elephants and their characters, the ways of training them, their ailments and remedies. This has survived as a single manuscript, rendered valuable mainly by its illustrations. This text on elephants is adorned with numerous miniatures illustrating the different chapters on the varieties of elephants, their capture, habits, training procedures and care. The text also incorporates popular beliefs and magico-religious practices (Mazars, 1994). The materials of this text were borrowed from the corpus of the local tradition. *Gajendra Cintāmani* by Sambunath (1713) is written in Tai-Ahom language of which the *Hastividyārnava* is a re-composition in Assamese.

Apart from these two Assamese manuscripts, *Hāthi Puthi* is an illustrated manuscript related to elephants from 19<sup>th</sup> century available at Auniati Satra Museum, Majuli, Assam.

### ***Ain-I-Akbari* of Abul Fazl Allami**

*Ain-I-Akbari* of Abul Fazl Allami (1598) refers to the elephant corps in the army and also talks about elephants as an important asset of a well-run kingdom. It mentions about the various breeds as well as the price of the elephants. It also mentions about the various categories of royal elephants, their sizes and physical structure, their food habits, upkeep and kind of staff appointed to train the elephants. It informs us about the different types of servants and keepers appointed at the royal stable for upkeep and training of the elephants. It describes about the purpose of elephant training. It explains about the different ornaments and trappings used to control harness the elephants, and

methods adopted for hunting and catching the wild elephants. It also records information about the wages of the hunters.

### ***Feelnāmah***

*Feelnāmah* is the Persian paper manuscript with miniature paintings from 19<sup>th</sup> century written in *Nastāʿ līq* script. It consists of three separate works. The first two are illustrated with miniature paintings featuring elephants. The first work deals with mythology and legends surrounding elephants and the art of *mahouts* (elephant-riders) and features illustrations to that effect. It appears to bear the title the *Kursināmah* whose author is Sayyid Ahmed al-Kabir; it is a genealogical tree work dealing with the genealogy of the elephant. The text is structured in the form of question and answer. The second work included in the manuscript is the *Feelnāmah*, the book of elephants, which describes the victorious encounter of Jahandar Shah with a wild elephant, the work was written by an author with the pen-name ‘Rahi’. The final work is related to the art of *mahoutkari* i.e. taming and riding elephants.

### **Summary of Manuscripts Depicting Elephant Lore and the Published Works**

| Name of the Manuscript                          | Author of the Manuscript | Availability in the Library  | Published Work with details  |
|---|--------------------------|--|--|
| <i>Gajaśāstra</i> (Sanskrit - Illustrated)      | Palakappya               | Saraswati Mahal Library, Tanjavur, Tamil Nadu  | <i>Gajaśāstra</i> , Ed. by S. Gopalan, Saraswati Mahal Series No. 76: 1958   |
| <i>Gajaśāstra</i> (Sanskrit - Illustrated)      | Vyasa                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Saraswati Mahal Library, Tanjavur, Tamil Nadu</li> <li>Shri Bhavani Museum and Library, Aundh, Satara, Maharashtra</li> </ul> | <i>Gajaśāstra</i> , Ed. by S. Gopalan, Saraswati Mahal Series No. 76: 1958   |
| <i>Gajaśāstram</i> (Sanskrit - Illustrated)     | Visampayana              | Saraswati Mahal Library, Tanjavur, Tamil Nadu  | <i>Gajaśāstra</i> , Ed. by S. Gopalan, Saraswati Mahal Series No. 76: 1958   |
| <i>Gajaśikṣā</i> (Sanskrit)                     | Naradamuni               | Sri Venkateswara University Oriental Research Institute, Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh  | <i>Gajaśikṣā</i> by Naradamuni, Ed. by E.R. Sreekrishna Sarma, Tirupati: Sri Venkateswara University Oriental Research Institute, 1975   |
| <i>Gajagrahaṇaprakāra</i> (Sanskrit)            | Narayana Diksita         | Sri Venkateswara University Oriental Research Institute, Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh  | <i>Gajagrahaṇaprakāra</i> , Ed. by E.R. Sreekrishna Sarma, Tirupati: Sri Venkateswara University Oriental Research Institute, 1968   |
| <i>Hastyaṅgveda</i> (Sanskrit)                  | Palakappya               | Anandashram Sanstha, Pune, Maharashtra   | <i>Hastyaṅgveda</i> , Ed. by Shivadutta Sharma, Anandashrama Sanskrit Series No. 26, 1894  |
| <i>Mātaṅgalīla</i> (Sanskrit)                   | Nilakantha               | Saraswati Mahal Library, Tanjavur, Tamil Nadu  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Mātaṅgalīla</i> of Nilakantha, Ed. by T. Ganapati Sastri, Trivandrum Sanskrit Series No. 10, 1910</li> <li>The Elephant-lore of the Hindus: The Elephant-Sport (<i>Mātaṅgalīla</i> of Nilakantha), Tr. by F. Edgerton. New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1931.</li> </ul> |
| <i>Hastividyārṇava</i> (Assamese - Illustrated) | Sukumara Barkaith        | Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati, Assam  | <i>Hastividyārṇava</i> , Ed. by P.C. Choudhury, Guwahati: Publication Board Assam, 1976  |
| <i>Feelnāmah</i> (Persian)                      |                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>National Museum, New Delhi</li> <li>Husaini Arts – Collection of Islamic and Indian Art Gallery, London</li> </ul>            |  |

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|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|--|--|
| <i>Hāhi Puthi</i> (Assamese)        |                            | Auniati Satra Museum, Majuli, Assam            |  |
| <i>Gajendracintamani</i> (Tai-Ahom) | Sambhunatha                | Auniati Satra Museum, Majuli, Assam            |  |
| <i>Arthaśāstra</i>                  | Kautilya                   | Oriental Research Institute, Mysore, Karnataka | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Kautilya's Arthaśāstra</i>, Tr. by R. Shamasastri, Mysore: Oriental Research Institute, 2015</li> <li>• <i>Arthaśāstra</i> of Kautilya, Ed. by Vachaspati Gairola, Varanasi: Chowkhamba Vidyabhavan, 1962</li> </ul>   |
| <i>Ain-I-Akbari</i> (Persian)       | Abul Fazl                  | Hazarduari Palace, West Bengal                 | The original Persian text was translated into English in three volumes. The first volume, translated by Heinrich Blochmann (1873) consisted of Books I and II. The second volume, translated by Colonel Henry Sullivan Jarrett (1891), consisted of Book III. The third volume, also translated by Jarrett (1896), consisted of Books IV and V. These three volumes were published by the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta as a part of their <i>Bibliotheca Indica</i> series. |
| <i>Niṭisāra</i>                     | Kamandaka                  |  | The <i>Niṭisāra</i> by Kamandakī, ed. By Raja Rajendra Lala Mitra, Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1884.  |
| <i>Yaśastilakacampu</i>             | Somadevasuri               |  | <i>Yaśastilakacampu</i> of Somadevasuri, <i>Kanampala</i> No. 70 1916  |
| <i>Mānasollasa</i>                  | King Somesvara III Cālukya |  | <i>Mānasollasa</i> of Somesvara, Vol. I, Gaekwad's Oriental Series No. 28, 1967  |
| <i>Yuktikalpataru</i>               | Bhoja                      |  | <i>Yuktikalpataru</i> , Ed. by Isvara Chandra Sastri, Calcutta: 1917   |
| <i>Sukranitīsāra</i>                | Sukracharya                |  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Sukranitīsāra</i> of Sukracharya, Tr. By Khemraj Srikrishnadas, Bombay: Venkateswar Street, 1956</li> <li>• <i>Sukranitī</i>, Tr. By B.K. Sarkar, Allahabad: Panini Office, Bhuvanewari Asrama, 1923</li> </ul>  |
| <i>Bṛhatsamhitā</i>                 | Varahamihira               |  | <i>Bṛhatsamhitā</i> of Varahamihira, Varanasi: The Chowkhamba Vidyabhavan, 1977  |
| <i>Agnipurāṇa</i>                   | Vaiṣṇava Sect              |  | <i>Agnipurāṇa</i> , Bengali translation by T. Kavyatirtha, Calcutta: H.L. Choudhury  |

## Conclusion

The elephant was considered as a part of the royal society. It was used in war, in sports and hunting; and for amusements. The sciences regarding the medical treatment and use of the elephant in different fields of activities were learnt and practiced by the keepers of the elephants of the king. The process of riding the elephant, and capturing the wild ones were learnt and practiced by the king himself. It was obligatory on the part of the kings and their ministers to have some knowledge of the elephant lore. Therefore on instructions of the then kings an extensive body of literature had been produced in India on the management of domesticated elephants. From then on no Hindu work on statecraft or political science ignored the subject of what is now called elephantology. The related Sanskrit works like Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra*, Somesvara's *Mānasollasa*, Somadevasuri's *Yaśastilakacampu*, Bhoja's *Yuktikalpataru*, Sukracharya's *Sukranitīsāra*, and Persian works like Abul Fazl's *Ain-I-Akbari* provide information about categories of royal elephants, their capturing and

training, duties of their overseers, and their overall management and care in royal stables or sanctuaries. Kamandaka's *Niṭisāra* suggests various battle formations and strategies with regards to elephants.

Apart from the works on statecraft, there are several other works which are totally devoted to elephantology. The Palakappya's *Hastyāyurveda* and *Gaja Śāstra* imply knowledge of medical treatment of different ailments of the elephant; hence the main emphasis herein is on the medical aspect. Nilakantha's *Mātangalīla* is devoted to the study of nature, activities, likes and dislikes of the elephant, their capture and care rather than the medical aspect. Unlike these works, Naradiya *Gajaśikṣā* and Narayana Diksita's *Gajagrahanaparakārah* mainly deal with the catching of elephants and training them. Whereas Sukumar Barkaith's *Hastividyārnava* covers all the aspects of elephant science, like characteristics of elephants, their management and care, their training, their ailments and its remedies etc. Altogether these various texts contain information about every aspect of elephants – their biological features, taming by man and use for a variety of purposes. These texts also simultaneously illustrate the richness and variety of ancient Indian thought.

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