

***Vaprakrīā*: A Playful Butting of Elephants**

Amogh Prabhudesai¹

Elephants have always played an important role in the life of Indian people since ancient times. There was a time when the strength of a king was measured based on the number of elephants in his possession. The importance of elephants in the social and political life of India naturally mirrored into the Sanskrit literature. Various aspects of elephants have been mentioned in Sanskrit since ancient times. The Arthacastra of Kaumilya which can be dated as early as the third century BC¹ also discusses the life of elephants and how they can be trained to fulfill various purposes by a king.

The Sanskrit texts mentioning elephants can be divided into two broad categories, namely, classical texts and technical or scientific texts. Classical texts include epics, lyrical poetries, dramas etc. In these texts, elephants may come as a part of a story. Many times elephants have provided nice similes for the use to classical poets. The second type of texts, i.e. technical texts, is totally devoted to the elephant-science. These texts discuss care and training part of elephants thoroughly.

In both kinds of these texts, elephants' behaviour has been discussed. Readers come across various aspects of elephant-life while going through these texts. One of such behaviours is '*Vaprakrīā*'.

Vaprakrīā literally means sport against mounds, where *vapra* means mound and *krīā* means sport. So, elephants' behaviour of hitting trees, walls, huge stones, river-banks or mountain-skirts by their tusks is called as *vaprakrīā* in Sanskrit. Monier-Williams dictionary gives meaning as 'playful butting of an elephant against a bank or mound of any kind'. This behaviour can also be seen in a few other mammals like bullocks and deers. A Sanskrit lexicon Ābhidhānaśāstra gives definition of *vaprakrīā* as *utkhātakeliḥ srngādyaivaprakrīā nigadyate*², i.e. an act of excavation by horns etc. is called as *vaprakrīā*. Excavation by horns is in case of bullocks and deers. Since elephants do not have horns, tusks are implied by 'etc'. Sometimes, this word is also written as *vaprakriyā*, where *kriyā* means action.

This behaviour among elephants is seen during their rutting period. There has been a number of research studies in modern times on elephants and this behaviour is also very well described. It is seen during pre-musth and musth periods. In the post musth period, elephants calm down. "Initial period of musth lasts for 10 to 15 days. Here the temporal gland becomes enlarged and the animal may rub the region with the tip of the trunk or on wall or on trees. They become excited and easily irritable.

¹ Assistant Professor in the Department of Sanskrit and Lexicography, Deccan College Postgraduate and Research Institute, India.

A hard swelling may be noticed in the perineal region.”³ In the musth period, “Behaviour patterns would be more excitement with spread-out ears, by driving away peoples and animals by hurling the feed, in particular palm logs and also by attacking inanimate objects. The animal spends most of its time in apparently aimless rhythmic oscillations of head and neck with trunk raised high. The eyes become glary and it becomes violent and urinates without protrusion of penis. Progressively the temporal glands get reduced in size and the animal gradually comes to the stage of normalcy.”⁴ Also, “The following behaviours have been observed to be associated with musth . . . tusking the ground, lifting and hurling vegetations and mud”.⁵

It confirms that this behaviour amongst elephants is seen during their rutting period and elephants get aggressive in this period. Now the references of *vaprakrîâ* in the Sanskrit literature will be checked under the light of this scientific knowledge.

References of *vaprakrîdâ* in the classical Sanskrit literature

The earliest mention of the word *vaprakrîdâ* in the Sanskrit literature is found in the literature of the great poet Kâlidâsa who lived in the 4th century AD. It is found in two of his works, namely, Meghadûta and Raghuvamsha. In Meghadûta, the hero, Yaksha, sees a cloud clinging to the peak of a mountain. Kâlidâsa uses here his favourite figure of speech simile and says that the cloud was looking like an elephant stooping down in his butting sport against the mountain.

*tasminnadrâu katicidabalâviprayuktas sa kâmi
nîtvâ mâsânkanaavalayabhramasariktaprakosthah
âsâhasya prathamadivase meghamâslicmasânum
vaprakrîâparinatagajaprekcanîyam dadarîa.*⁶

The second mention of the word is in the 5th chapter of Kâlidâsa’s Raghuvamsha. Here, the hero, Aja, who has encamped his army on the bank of the river Narmadâ, sees a wild elephant coming out of the stream of the river. Kâlidâsa, while describing the elephant, says that its tusks were rock blunted due to the butting sport on the skirt of the mountain Rksavat

*athoparicmâdbhramarairbhramadbhih prâksûcitântassalilapraveûah
nirdhautadânâmalaganabhrtirvanyassaritto gaja unmamajja.
nissecaviksâlithâtunâpi vaprakriyâmrksavatastatesu.
nîlordhvarekhâûabalenasamsandantadvayenâsmavikunthitena.*⁷

¹ The chronology of Sanskrit texts set by the Deccan College for its dictionary project has been followed in this paper.

² Sabdaratnasamanvayakoṣa p.101

³ Deepa Ananth, p. 260

⁴ Deepa Ananth, p. 260

⁵ T.N.C. Vidya & R. Sukumar, pp.1203-4

⁶ Meghadûta 2

⁷ Raghuvamsha. 5.44

The third reference of *vaprakrîâ* is from *Avantisundarikathâ* of *Danî*. It belongs to the 7th century. The word comes here as a part of an adjective used for elephants. He says that eastern seas have become gray because of the spread of sand which has risen up from the violent *vaprakrîâ* of the best elephants.

*sarabhasavaprakrîâyoddhûtasaitatavisaradhûsaritapûrvasâgarâh ... matangajottamâh.*⁸

Next occurrences are from the 13th century texts *Suv[ttatilaka* and *Nemidûta*. *Suv[ttatilaka* is a book on Sanskrit meters. As it quotes the same verse from *Meghadûta* as an example of *Mandâkrântâ* meter, there is nothing to discuss in it. *Nemidûta* is inspired by *Kâlidâsa*'s *Meghadûta*. The author, *Vikrama* has composed verses in the '*samasyâpûrtî*' style. He keeps the last line of every verse same as in *Meghadûta* and composes earlier three lines in such a manner that the verse will exhibit *Jaina* philosophy. In this very verse he says that a princess saw the sage *Nemi* who was looking like an elephant stooping down in his *vaprakrîâ*. The verse with the word *vaprakrîâ* is as follows-

sâ tatroccaih sikharini samâsinamenam munîsam

nâsânyastânimisanayanam dhyânanirdhûtadosam.

yogâsaktam sakalajaladasyâmalam râjaputrî

*vaprakrîâparinatagajapreksanîyam dadarsa.*⁹

Next reference is from the 15th century text *RâjataraEginî*. It was authored by *Jonarâja*. This verse is not found in all the printed versions. Only one printed book contains it. The verse seems to be interpolated as it has nothing to do with the story going on.

punnâgavrajamunmumûlayisati prâyah karâkarsanai

ruddâmam vijihîrsati pratipadam kakcyâshidâm kânkisyati.

kâm naicchannpagandhrasindhurapatistîvrâm na vaprakriyâm

*tîknâgrapatibhânkuso 'sya nikame mantrî niyantâ punah*¹⁰

Next reference is from the 17th century text *Bhâratacampu*. The text is penned by a poet named *Ananta*. It is based on the story of *Mahâbhârata*. While describing the fight between *Arjuna* and *Úankara*, poet says that the joy *Sankar* felt by the stroke of *Arjuna* was much greater than that he felt when he saw his elephant headed little son (*Ganesa*) doing *vaprakrîâ*.

devasya tasya jagatâm janakasya citte

pârthaprahârajanusah pramadâmburâseh.

⁸ *AvantiSundarikathâ p. 81*

⁹ *NemiDûta. 2*

¹⁰ *RâjTaranginî.(Jonarâja) 499*

*bhûsâdhunîtamabhuvî dvîpavakrabâlya-
vaparakriyâbhiruditah pramadah kano 'bhût.*¹¹

Next reference is again from the 17th century text Zivalîlârnavâ where poet says that *vaparakriâ* of elephants is making windows on the upper side of a *sâla* tree.

*vaparakriyâsu nirmagnairdantairamaradantinâm.
srngesu tasya sâlasya gavâksâni vitenire.*¹²

The last reference of *vaparakriâ* found in the Sanskrit literature is from the second half of the 17th century. A lexicon named *sabdaratnasamanvayakoœa* gives definition of *vaparakriâ* which is already seen in the introductory part of the paper.

*utkhâtakelih Srngâdyairvaparakriâ nigadyate.*¹³

Now it is clear from the above references that the word *vaparakriâ* / *kriyâ* appears only for 9 times in the classical Sanskrit literature. Out of nine, one reference is from lexicon and one quoted from Meghadûta only. Nemidûta is fully inspired from Kâlidâsa's Meghadûta. So, the word is used to show something independently in poetry for only six times. The first use of this word is done by Kâlidâsa in two of his texts. So, he can be given the credit of coining this word.

Kâlidâsa's Meghadûta is prior to his Raghuvamsa. So, first ever use of the word he has done is in the Meghadûta. It seems that Kâlidâsa was not sure about the meaning of the word at that time. He says there, '*vaparakriâparinatagaja*'. Here the word *parinata* means 'slanting stroke of tusk'. Halâyudha defines it '*tiryagdantaprahârastu gajah parinato matah*'. Kâlidâsa seems to have thought here that the word *vaparakriâ* is not enough to describe the exact action. He might have thought that *vaparakriâ* is only straight stroke against mounds. It doesn't inherit slanting strokes of tusks. Hence, to give the full description of the action, he might have used the word *parinata* in addition to *vaparakriâ*. While commenting on this, Mallinâtha dissolves the compound as *saptamî tatpuruca* to give the meaning '*vaparakriâsu parinatah*', i.e. 'stooping down in butting sport'. On the other hand, later in Raghuvamsa, Kâlidâsa seems to have thought that the word *vaparakriâ* inherits the sense of 'slanting strokes' also in it. There he says that the *vaparakriâ* of the elephant was clearly betrayed by his rock-blunted tusks with blue lines of scratches. It is clear from the description that the elephant has hit the mountain-skirts with straight strokes as well as slanting strokes. Otherwise there won't be blunt and upward scratches at a time. So, Kâlidâsa omits the word *parinata* and considers that *vaparakriâ* contains that meaning also. From the description in Raghuvamsa, it seems that Kâlidâsa was well aware of the fact that this behaviour is seen in the rutting period only. So, he mentions the musth of the elephant in the earlier verse.

¹¹ Bhâratâcampu. 4.90

¹² sivalîlârnavâ 4.95

¹³ Sabdaratnasamanvayakosa p.101

Danî in his *Avantisundarîkathâ* calls the *vaprakrîâ* as *sarabhasa*, i.e. violent. This is an exact scientific description. Many other poets have described this behaviour as ‘playful’ which is wrong as per the modern research mentioned earlier.

In *Nemidûta*, the poet Vikrama says that Nemi, a Jaina monk, was looking like an elephant busy in *vaprakrîâ*. This description shows that Vikrama is unaware of the meaning of the word. Since he himself says that Nemi was *yogâsakta* and *dhyânanirdhûtadosa*, it is quite impossible for him to look like a *vaprakrîâparinata* elephant. The simile he has used is faulty in this case.

The reference of *Bhâratcampu* is quite interesting. Poet says that Lord Ganesa was doing *vaprakrîâ* on the bank of Ganges. Since Ganesa is an elephant-headed god according to Hindu mythology, poet seems to have imposed this behaviour of elephants on him. But he has done a technical mistake here. He says Ganesa did it in his childhood. Elephants are not found showing this behaviour in childhood. It exhibits his lack of knowledge about this behaviour of elephants.

References of *vaprakrîâ* in the scientific Sanskrit literature

There are a few texts purely devoted to elephant-science in Sanskrit. They discuss how domestic elephants should be taken care of and trained. *Hastyâyurveda* and *Gajaûâstra* attributed to the sage *Pâlakâpya*, *Gajaûikcâ* of *Nârada* and *Mâtangalîlâ* of *Nîlakantha* are important amongst them. All these three texts are from the 13th century AD and discuss only about elephants. There are few texts like *Mrgapakciûâstra*, *Kautilya’s Arthauâstra* etc from different times which also discuss few aspects elephants.

Even though these texts boast of being scientific texts, i.e. *ûâstragranthas*, none of them has mentioned *vaprakrîâ*. They discuss sometimes about musth in details. *Mâtangalîlâ* has separate chapter called *madabhedâdhikâra*. But *vaprakrîâ* or such behaviour is not discussed there. So, a question can be asked whether the authors of these so called scientific texts were really conversant with elephant-science or not.

Conclusion

Following observations can be made from the discussion above:

1. The word *vaprakrîâ* is coined by *Kâlidâsa*.
2. This word is used in only classical Sanskrit literature. The Sanskrit texts related to elephant-science neither use this word nor discuss the behaviour by any other word.
3. Even though many classical Sanskrit poets have used this word, they seem to have observed only external behaviour of elephants. Due to their unawareness of exact reasons behind this behaviour, sometimes the word seems inappropriate at the places it is used.
4. Only *Kâlidâsa* in *Raghuvamsa* and *Dandî* in *Avantisundarîkathâ* have used the word properly. That suggests they knew the exact reasons behind this behaviour.

5. The behaviour suggested by the word *vaprakriā* is taken as playful light behaviour by many of these authors, commentators and translators also. This is a big mistake. *Vaprakriā* is a violent behaviour of elephants resulted from some natural internal changes.
6. The knowledge of the authors who have written Sanskrit texts on elephant-science and their purpose behind writing them can be questioned as they have missed to explain this important behaviour of elephants.

References

- Musth in Elephants, Ananth, Deepa, Zoo's Print Journal, Vol. 15(5), pp. 259-262, May 2000.
- Social and Reproductive Behaviour in Elephants, Vidya T.N.C. & R. Sukumar, Current Science, Vol. 89, No.7, pp. 1200-1207, October 2005.
- Avantisundarī, Pillai, S.K., Anantashayana Sanskrit Granthavali No. 172, 1954.
- Champūbhāratam, Acharya, Narayan Ram (Ed.), Nirnaya Sagar Press, Bombay, 1950.
- Gaja sāsram, Subrahmanyam Shastri, K.S., T.M.S.S.M. Library, Tanjore, 1958.
- Gaja siksā, Sarma, Shreekrishna, Sri Venkateshwara University O.R.Institute, Tirupati, 1975.
- Halāyudhakosah, Joshi, Jayashankar, Uttar Pradesh Hindi Sansthan, Lucknow, 1993.
- Hastyāyurvedah, Sharma, Shivadatta (Ed.), Anandashram, Pune, 1894.
- Kaumilyārthasāstra, Venkatanathacharya, N.S.(Ed.), Oriental Research Institute, Mysore, 1960.
- Rājatarangini of Jonarāja, Singh, Raghunath, Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, 1972.
- sabdaratnasamanvayakosa, Shastri, V.L. (Ed.), Baroda Oriental Institute, 1932.
- Siva Lilarnava by Sri Nilakantha Dikshita, Sri Vani Vilas Press, Srirangam, 1911.
- Srīnemidūtam, Sahityacharya, Vinayasagar (Ed.), Jain Press, Kota, 1958.
- Suvrttilakam (with Hindi Comm. Prakāsa), Jha, Vraja Mohan, Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, 1968.
- The Elephant-Lore of The Hindus, Edgerton, Franklin, New Heaven Yale University Press, 1931.
- The Meghadūta of Kālidāsa, Kale, M.R., Motilal Banarsidass, 8th Ed. 1974, Reprint 1987.
- The Raghuvāḍā of Kālidāsa (Cantos I-X), Kale, M.R., The Oriental Publishing Company, 1915.