

Ancient knowledge System of Elephants

A Study from Brhatsamhitā and Agnipurāna

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Elephant is the most valuable wild animal that attracted the attention of men since the dawn of civilization. It bears so much importance to the Indian context that almost all branches of Sanskrit literature include references more or less to this quadruped under various pretexts. Even a considerable number of independent treatises were composed in Sanskrit and other Indian languages dealing exclusively with different aspects of this animal. Apart from this there are some texts in Sanskrit literature like the Epics, Purāṅga's, Śāstric texts such as Arthaśāstra and Āyurveda which are found to devote some chapters or sections on topics such as its mythical origin, methods of capturing, process of domesticating, feeding, and general nourishments, treatment for diseases and some defects, normal and abnormal behaviours, characteristics and categories of the elephants. Some of these texts include descriptions on various beliefs, good or bad omens associated with pet elephants especially their connection with the fate and fortune of their owners. This present papers aims at giving a descriptions on some of the aspects of elephants as depicted in the Brhatsamhitā, and astrological text in Sanskrit by Varahamihira, of sixth century A.D. and the Agnipurāna, one of the eighteen mahāpurāns belonging most probably to ninth century A.D. It is interesting to note the significance of topics dealt in connection with this domesticated quadruped belonging to the early medieval period of India.

Since the Brhatsamhitā is an astrological text, it is natural that the author describes good and bad aspects of the bodily features of elephants. On the basis of the same, the elephants are classified in to different categories. Some of these are considered auspicious and believed to bring good luck to their owner. Whereas some other are said to be inauspicious inviting thereby misfortune to the masters. Varahamihira devoted two chapters of his treatise in dealing with elephants. The 67th chapter contains 10 verses out of which the first five are having the description of four types of elephants along with their broad and distinctive bodily features. These are known as Bhadra, manda, m[ga, and sankīrna. The colour of the skin and ichor belonging to one category are one and the same, but these differ from one category to another (67.1-5). In the next three verses there are some deeper descriptions on various limbs sense organs and other minor body parts, which are considered to be auspicious. Therefore, these are indicative of bringing good fortune for the owner (67.6-8). Whereas the last two verses contain descriptions on some body parts which can be described as abnormal and thereby believed to be the causes of misfortune to the king. The author advises to abandon such elephants. Practically these are to be driven out from the kingdom in order to protect the king, kingdom, and its subjects from falling into various miseries(67.9-10)

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The 94th chapter of 14 verses is the other one where the author mostly deals with the tusks of the elephants, especially when the same are cut or broken. Since ivory is a valuable object it is required to be procured frequently from the tuskers. There are proper methods and measurements to be followed at the time of cutting tusks from different varieties of elephants. Various parts of an elephant tusk are believed to be sacred for which the cutter has to take utmost care while cutting the same. Moreover the shape of the remaining parts of the tusks (after they are cut) plays an important role in deciding good or bad luck of the master. These descriptions one can trace from the first eight verses of this chapter(94.1-8). In the next three verses the author talks of broken tusks of elephants either accidentally or otherwise. Here, also the different shapes of the remaining tusks(after these are broken) are believed to be suggestive of future fortune or misfortune of the king, the prince, his preceptor, the army, the queen and other royal family members. Even the king's future victory and defeat in connection with a battle against his enemy can be predicted through the nature and shape of remaining broken parts of the tusks of his elephants. (94.9-11).

There is a description of omens good or bad to be marked from some unusual but spontaneous behaviour of the domesticated elephants of a king. The author finally talks of the predictions of the king's victory or defeat in dealing with his enemy in the battle through the pet elephant's inimical behaviour against a crocodile in deep waters (94.12-14). If the crocodile succeeds in dragging the elephants in to the water then the king would be surly defeated. But in case of the elephant's dragging the aquatic reptile with force out of the water then it is a sign of king's victory over his enemy (94.14).

The following points may be insinuated from these two chapters of the astrological texts. Once the elephant is domesticated by any person or any king, it is believed to become associated with the destiny of that individual.

Since, it is a common phenomenon for the astrological texts to forecast all types of future happening in connection with an individual by means of the study on different behavioural attitudes as well as bodily structures and signs noticed in his pet animals, Varahamihira's attempt to deal with some such aspects of the elephants and their connection with the owner's life is a worth endeavour. Moreover, this study may focus on some beliefs and practices of ancient Indians with regard to the giant animal.

Agnipurāna is an exceptionally large text containing topics covering a vast area of human knowledge available to the then medieval India. Apart from its including descriptions coming under the five main characteristics of the purāṅga literature this text deals with many more subjects matter from different disciplines such as ancient medicinal science, astronomy and astrology, veterinary science, poetics, tantric and the metaphysical science. Within its extent of 383 chapters two are devoted to discuss on topics related to elephants, i.e. the 287th and 291st chapters. While in the former chapter the main subject matter is diseases of elephants and their remedies, the latter one discusses on some propitiatory rituals to be performed with the purpose of removing the diseases, defects and abnormalities. These two chapters consist of 33 and 24 verses respectively. In the first five verses of the former chapter there is a general discussion on good and bad types of elephants. The good ones are said to have long trunks, twenty or eighteen nails, rut exuding even in winter, an elevated right tusks, wide

ears, good complexion, good nature, and good appearance, full of strength, firmness and speed. Such elephants usually conquer in the battle and therefore should be well maintained. But it is not advisable to be maintained the elephants which are short, stupid and have bad features. The she elephants are not be captured or domesticated at all (287.1-5).

There is a long discussion on various diseases along with their treatment running up to eighteen verses from sixth to twenty third verses. Some of the diseases of elephants are identified as *pākalas*, *pānuroga*, *ānāha*, *mūrcchā*, *śirahśūla*, *vepathuh*, *atisārah*, *karagrahah*, *utkarnaka*, *galagrahagadah*, *mūtrabhangah*, *krmikocmhah*, *aruchih*, *gulmah*, *vidravah*, *kamurogah*, and *sarvasūlah*. The details of their remedies include medicines prepared out of ghee, oil, cow urine, turmeric, liquor called *vārunī*, various types of salts, *vidanga*, *triphalā*, dried ginger, pepper, honey, juice of the flesh of peacock and partridge, tender *bilva*, *lodhra*, *dhātaki*, suger, rice or barley gruel, *musta*-grass, flesh of pig, horse beans, tamarind, *kākamāci*, seeds of *trāpuca*, bark of *neem* or *vr̥sa*, *agnidanti*, *arka*, *śyāmā indrayava*, *hingu*, *sarala* etc. Among several medical applicative processes are, food, drink, loosening, enema, anointment, application of oil, oily enema, besmearing and sternutatory, (287.6-23)

For the general nourishment of the elephants, one has to prepare their main meals out of different rice varieties like *sastika*, *vr̥thi*, and *śālī*, of other grains like barley and wheat as well as sugar cane (287.24-25). For regaining strength milk, juices of flesh cooked as food are recommended (287.26). In case of severe injury in the battle field, the elephant should be fed with the flesh of crows, hens, cuckoos and owls mixed with honey (287.27). To ensure victory, one should provide incense of pepper, fish, *viadanga*, alkaline salt, juice of *kocātakī* and turmeric (287.28). In order to sharpen the eye sight of a war elephant and to make the elephant destructive, special type of liniment and collyrium are to be prepared and applied to eyes of the elephant respectively (287.29-30). Similarly it is instructed to prepare a paste out of sum specific objects which when applied, can work as an excellent cooling agent (287.31-32). Once in a month the grownup nails of the pet elephants are to be cut and they should be bathed with oil at least once in a month (287.32). In the seasons of autumn and summer their body should be anointed with butter. An ideal bed for the elephants is prescribed as the powdered dry cow dung (287.33).

Since the latter chapter elaborately deals with complicated rituals to be performed in order to remove diseases from the elephants, one finds that the same consist of ritual activities like drawing a broad lotus shaped diagram at a place outside the city (verses 5-6), one hundred oblations are offered to Airavata and other elephants (verse 13), various gods, goddesses, deified objects and some super natural powers are to be worshiped duly inside as well as all around the same diagram (verses 1-11). A long formula is prescribed in the verses from 16th to 20th which is to be muttered by an astrologer (Kālavid). There is another instruction to draw a comparatively smaller diagram outside the shade for the elephants in which the guardians of the cardinal points and others should be worshipped along with Bala, Nāga, the earth and Saraswatī (verse 22). Costly and suitable gifts (dakciGā), should be givento the brahmins at the end of all worships (verses 4,14 and 23). The astrologer, the superintendant and the guard of the elephants are also worshipped and a small drum is given as a gift to the superintendant with which he is instructed to produce auspicious and loud sounds (verses 23-24).

Conclusion

The entire procedure gives an idea of a Tantric worship. It seems that the owner of the elephants bears the entire expenditure on behalf of who the performances take place for the safety of his elephants. The propitiatory worship may not be an absolute alternative measure to the medicinal treatment mentioned in the previous chapter but as an additional effort with a belief to alleviate the suffering of the animals. Finally one may point out the most significant nature of the ancient knowledge on the elephants as revealed through the above two texts. Measures described to be taken in connection with these giant animals are equally based on and influenced by practical experience as well as popular beliefs and notions beyond logical conclusions.

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