

Mātangalīlā: An Ancient Text on Elephant Science

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Introduction

Mātangalīlā (ML) is an ancient treatise composed in Sanskrit language on the science of elephants. Mātangalīlā means Elephant-sport. The treatise covers all aspects about elephants: the origin of Elephant-lore, myths about the origin of elephants, their characteristics, usability, capturing techniques and care in captivity and so on.

Author, Place and Date of Mātangalīlā

The ML is composed by an otherwise unknown Nīlakantha. The author hails from the Southern Indian State of Kerala. The available edition of the text is by T. Ganòapatisastri, who used three manuscripts from the 18th CE. All are palm-leaf manuscripts discovered in Kerala. Hence, the editor presumes that the author Nīlakantha must be from the same region.

It appears that though the manuscripts are from early 18th century, the text itself is much older. The text is included in the corpus of the well-known Encyclopaedic Sanskrit Dictionary Project run by the Deccan College, Pune where its date is assumed as 13th CE. However, we do not have any decisive evidence for the acceptance of this assumption. Edgerton, the translator of the ML thinks that (1931: vii) “For aught we know it may go back a thousand years or even to a much earlier date. This, however, is purely conjectural, all we can say is that there is no positive trace of modernity in the work.” We agree with Edgerton that the period of the ML may go back to 8th or 9th CE or even earlier as he predicts.

Another well-known treatise on the Elephant-science is Hastyāyurveda (HĀ). Its date is presumed as 13th CE in the Encyclopaedic Dictionary project. There is no concrete basis to presume the contemporariness of both the texts. About the chronology of the ML and the HĀ, it appears to us that the ML is an earlier text than that of the HĀ due its completeness even in brevity as if of the *sūtra*-style when compared to the latter, which is a bulky composition covering only one issue of medical treatment of elephants.¹

Nīlakantha, the author of the ML seems to be learned. His Sanskrit is flawless with the use of many well-known classical meters including easy form of verse, the *anusmābh* on one hand and

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long meters such as *sragdhrā* on the other. To give an illustration of his simple but beautiful style of composition, we may cite the second verse of this treatise, where the author uses the alliteration of the word *mātanga*.

*mātagavaktram pranipatya drstvā mātangaśāstram munipungavoktam |
mātangalīlācalitāntarātmā mātangalīlām racayāmi tāvat || ML 1.2*

“Having paid obeisance to Elephant-face (Ganeśa), having studied the Science of elephants expounded by the distinguished Sage (Pālakāpya), having let my mind dwell upon the sport of elephants, I now compose this ‘Elephant-sport’.”²

Arrangement of the Text and the topics dealt with in the Mātangalīlā

There is a verse in the beginning (1.3) of the ML, which describes all the topics covered in the whole text.

The text is spread over twelve *pamalās*, sections with 263 verses. The verses in the sections are unevenly distributed from three to fifty-one. The sections in ML are as follows:

1. Nāgotpattyadhikāra: A section on the origin of elephants

As the name Nāgotpatti suggests, the first section deals with the origin of elephants and magical birth of Palakapya. The text opens with the narration how King Romapāda, the king of Anga country met the sage Pālakāpya, who propounded the science of elephants. The section narrates the myth of origin of elephants, their descent on Earth after losing their supernatural powers and celestial mobility due to the curse of sage Dirghatapas; their request to Lord Brahmā and his promise to them for the treatment of their diseases on the earth; the mythical birth of Pālakāpya from a cow-elephant who is cursed Yacī and a sage engaged in chanting of *sāmans*; Pālakāpya’s growing up amongst elephants and his knowledge of their nature, diseases and their cure and so on; the preaching of this elephant-science by sage Pālakāpya to the king on his request. The section then describes various castes of elephants, etymological explanation of various words denoting elephants and description of their physical peculiarities.

2. Śubhalaksanādhikāra: A section on the auspicious marks

3. Aśubhalaksanādhikāra: A section on the inauspicious marks

The second and the third sections deal with the favorable and unfavorable marks of elephants respectively.

¹ Cf. Edgerton (1931: ix) saying “*HA*. is a very diffuse and bulky work (717 pages); its verbosity is in striking contrast to the elegant brevity of *ML*.”. However, Keith in his *History of Sanskrit Literature* (1920: 465) opines that the *ML* is a later text than the *HĀ* taking into consideration the form of the two texts in question. Keith thinks that the dialogue style of the *HĀ* is an older form of literature as compared to the verse-style of the *ML*. Keith says: “... the *Hastyāyurveda* in the form of a dialogue between king Romapāda of AĒga and the ancient sage Palakāpya has been preserved; the age of this curious compilation is quite uncertain. The *MātaEgalīlā* of NarayaGa on the other hand has a distinctly modern form, being written in part in elaborate metre...” One must note here that instead of NīlakaGmha, Keith erroneously mentions NārāyaGa as the author of the *ML*.

² Translated after Edgerton (1931: 41).

4. Āyurlaksanādhikāra: A section on the marks of longevity

A comparatively short fourth section having only six verses describes marks of longevity of Elephants seen on their head, tail, and spine. It also describes marks of longevity that can be seen on the body of an animal at different stages of its growth. It is interesting to note that the lifespan of a best quality elephant is 120 years mentioned in the text matches with the modern account.³

5. Vayolaksanādhikāra: A section on the marks of life-stages

The fifth section deals with the life stages of elephants. The first stage is useless from human point of view. The next stage from the year twelve up to twenty-four is of middle importance for man and the stage of highest value is up to the sixtieth year thereafter. Special designations are given to the elephants in each of these life-stages.

6. Mānanirmayādhikāra: A section on the determination of measurements

This section gives the standard measurements of the three castes of elephants. The height of an elephant is measured from his shoulder up to the ground and his length from the eye up to the tip of his tail. The section also gives names of several body-parts. These names are very minutely given. E.g. 28 parts of trunk or 33 parts of the face with specific names.⁴ It appears that these names having no proper Sanskrit etymologies were well-known in elephant-lore.

7. Mūlyaviśecādhikāra: A section on the specific pricing

This shortest section with three verses deals with the price of elephants.

8. Sattvalaksanādhikāra: A section on the marks of character

This section describes character of elephants based on their physical and mental characteristics. Elephants are classified as Gods, Demons, Gandharvas, Yakcas, Piśācas and Nāgas and similar to four classes of men they are classified as BrahmaGas, Kcatriyas, Vaiśyas and Śudras. Hereafter are made seven categories depending on the response of animals to goading.

9. Madabhedādhikāra: A section on the kinds of must

This Section provides a full description of must, its different stages and important behavioural changes during must.

10. Gajagrahadhikāra: A section on the capture of elephants

This Section deals with the methods of capturing elephants along with the merits and demerits of each method.

³ Cf. Bedi (1969: 53) and Edgerton after Sanderson (1931: 23).

⁴ Cf. ML 6.7–13.

11. Gajaraksanadinartucaryādhikāra: Section on the keeping of elephants and their daily and seasonal routine

This is the longest of all the sections with fifty-one verses. In the beginning it emphatically says that being in the natural habitat is best for elephants and when they are captured are liable to die. Therefore a good care of captive elephant is necessary and therefore this section guides how an elephant trainer should take care of the daily routine of captive elephants in early days after their capture as well in general. The author in this section gives the guidelines of the nurturing of elephants, their food habits, their diseases and so on. The section closes with special tips for their care according to each season.

12. Ādhoranagunādyadhikāra: Section on the qualities of elephant-drivers etc.

This last section describes the desirable qualities of elephant managers, trainers and drivers. It then various techniques for training, gaits of elephants, methods of riding on their back, kinds of hooks, parts of elephant's body where hooks can be applied, degrees of severity of goading, ointments to be applied after hooking, the methods of mounting and dismounting of elephants. Thus in general this section is of miscellaneous nature.

The work comes to an end catching up the story of King Romapāda's learning of elephant-lore with sage Pālakāpya narrated in the beginning followed by author's modest hope that this brief work composed by him based on the vast ocean of elephant-lore taught by Pālakāpya will be critically approached by the learned people.⁵

The text is thus composed in a particular framework of the preaching of the elephant-lore to the King by the sage.

Technical Vocabulary in the Mātangalīlā

There are several technical words used by NīlakaGmha in the ML. We do not find them in both ancient and modern lexicons. If we accept that this technical vocabulary is unique to elephant-science, then we do not find these words even in the HĀ. E.g. various designations given to elephants in various life-stages such as *puccuka*, *Barbara*, *naikārika* etc. (ML 5.2, 5.5 and 5.7 respectively). The words are absent in all the lexicons and are not used elsewhere in the veterinary treatises as well as in other literature. The words *puccuka* and *naikārika* are used exclusively in the ML and not found in the HĀ. While *babara* is found in the HĀ,⁶ not in the sense similar to that of the ML. The ML uses this word as a specific designation of elephant in a particular stage and the HĀ uses it to mean a particular plant. Thus it appears that the ML has its own vocabulary which was probably well-known to elephant-trainers in that particular region.

⁵ *munīndroditamātangaśāstragādhārnāvān mayā | alpā mātangalīleti labdheyaA śodhyatām budhaih || ML 12.31. "From the deep sea of the elephant-science expounded by (that) noble sage, this small part, The Elephant-Sport, has been extracted by me; may it be corrected (or tested, examined) by the wise." Edgerton (1931: 112)*

⁶ Cf. HĀ 2.59(292.27) and 2.62(311.1).

Comparison of the Mātangalīlā with other treatises dealing with Elephant-science

Besides ML, there are a few treatises in Sanskrit dealing with Elephant-science. The main difference in these treatises is that the ML deals with all the possible aspects regarding elephants in a nutshell, while the other texts deal with some aspects about elephants. For example as we have already mentioned the HĀ focuses on the medical treatment of elephant-diseases. While doing so the text briefly touches the aspects such as the characteristics of elephants, facts about their life-span etc. The M[rgapakciūāstra narrates the life of elephants in their natural habitat, their behavioural patterns while living in the herds etc. It hardly speaks about capture of elephants and their domestication. While the texts on polity such as the Arthauāstra⁷ and sukranīti deal with elephants as one of the important part of warfare and hence focus on the capture, domestication and training of elephants for their use in battles. The Śukranīti⁸ also deals with the sizes of elephants and their classification. It gives the qualities of elephant-drivers.⁹ The Jaina text Yaśastilaka¹⁰ has scattered reference about characteristics of elephants. But this information comes in the flow of a narrative and has no value as science. The BrhatsaAhitā chapter 67 deals with the characteristics of elephants and auspicious and inauspicious marks of the animals and just therefore covers only one aspect of elephant-science. Thus, we may conclude that the ML is a full-fledge Gajāuāstra, elephant-science, covering all aspects regarding elephants.

Mātangalīlā and current practices

It appears that the elephant-lore taught in the treatises like ML has percolated among elephant-trainers through the ages. The modern methods of classification of elephants, their auspicious and inauspicious marks, the methods of their capture and care in captivity, the method of their valuation have continued in a the same manner as taught in the ML.¹¹ We come across texts written on the Gajāśāstrasāra even in the 19th century on the similar lines as that of the ML. To give an example, we may refer the reader to a text compiled in the reign of King Sarfoji II (CE. 1798-1832). This text is a compilation of elephant-lore described in old Sanskrit texts. This book written in Marathi profusely uses the ML as its base. This in itself proves the importance, continuity and potentiality of the text as elephant-science.

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⁷ Cf. Arthāśāstra 2.31 and 32.

⁸ Cf. Śukranīti 4.7.39-42.

⁹ Cf. Śukranīti 2.129.

¹⁰ Cf. Yaśastilaka Vol. 1 p. 482.

¹¹ Cf. Edgerton (1931: 9ff) quoting Sanderson.

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