Depictions of Elephants in Ancient Indian Manuscripts

Trupti D. More

ABSTRACT

Knowledge about the elephant is provided in several Indian manuscripts and treatises since ancient times. The role played by elephants in war made their management very essential for the kings and a lot of literature on various aspects such as elephant capturing, training and husbandry came into existence. Notable amongst these are the Hastyayurveda by Palakapya, the Hastividyrarnaava by Sukumar Barkaith, the Matanga Lila by Nilkantha, the Kautilya’s Arthashastra, the Brihat Samhita by Varahamihira, the Manasollasa by Someshwara, the Gaja Sastram and Gajalaksana Chikitsa by Vyas (Vaisampayan), the Gajayurveda by Bhattachrishnadasa, Feelnama and Kursinamah by Sayyid Ahmed al – Kabir, the Hati Puthi, and the Lava-Kushar Yuddha of Haribara Bipra etc. All these texts are rich sources of information on the elephants, sometimes supplemented by illustrations and paintings. These ancient sources deal with the status of distribution of elephants, their behavior, ecology, diet, genealogy, anatomy and physiology, growth and development, psychology, conflicts with people, diseases and their treatments, medicines and surgery, capturing, keeping, taming, management, care and training of elephants in royal captivity, and deployment in war. One can get knowledge about the changes in elephant habitat from comparisons of texts from different historical time periods. Much of the ancient knowledge about elephants is centered around the need to maintain them in captivity, and train and organize them in large numbers in the battlefields. Such aspects are covered in depth in the above cited ancient Indian manuscript texts. The paper gives brief summaries of these texts.

Keywords: Elephants, Manuscripts, Hastyayurveda, Palakapya, Hastividyrarnaava, Matanga Lila, Kautilya’s Arthashastra, Brihat Samhita, Manasollasa, Gaja Sastram, Gajalaksana Chikitsa, Vyasa, Gajayurveda, Feelnama, Kursinamah, Hati Puthi, Lava-Kushar Yuddha