

Chained and Unchanged Elephants

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ABSTRACT

The elephant is seen in some mid 18th to 20th century murals as the chief protagonist in Jātakas or as a mode of transport in processions. The caparisoning an elephant usually demonstrates that he is domesticated.

The colonial archive of photographs too shows the Sri Lankan elephant in the jungle, being caught in a krall or as a working elephant and finally as a performing elephant in the Dehiwala Zoo and an essential feature in processions.

Using examples from temple murals and colonial photographs, this short presentation will demonstrate the “wild elephant” in a process of being domesticated as a tamed “working elephant” and a “temple elephant” or in “Ethnographic Shows” in Europe.

The focus of this work in progress is to observe, to what extent the elephant had been chained, when he was brought to public space. Today we observe the multi chained elephants in temple processions, because they have not been domesticated sufficiently. The “tamed” elephant is forced to perform “acts of worship” to demonstrate his piety.

The discussion should lead to questioning the legitimacy of confronting the “semi-tamed” elephant with public space.

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