

“Animal Cruelty and the Public Opinion on Using Elephants for *Perahara*”

(Special Reference to *Mahanuwara Dalada Perahara*)

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Introduction

The elephant is a symbol closely tied to Sri Lankan Culture and the traditions. One cannot think of a Perahera without remembering this magnificent animal. However a number of issues have cropped up with regard to the usage of elephants in such traditional acts.

The first perahera was held in Anuradhapura and is a ritual believed to date back to the 3rd century BCE. However, due to invasions at the time, the tooth relic was shifted from Anuradhapura and found a permanent home at the Sri Dalada Maligawa. The Temple of the Tooth is Sri Lanka's most important Buddhist shrine, which has housed the Sacred Tooth Relic since the 16th Century.

Kandyan dancers, drummers, acrobats, flame dancers, whip dancers, and colourfully dressed elephants are just a few of the attractions that draw people in the thousands to Kandy, to witness the historic and religious Dalada Maligawa perahera.

The Dalada Maligawa Perahera is held in August every year with its main attraction being the many colourful elephants that take part in the procession. As part of the ceremony the sacred tooth relic of Lord Buddha is paraded through the streets in a casket in order to invoke the blessing of rain from the gods. The sacred relic casket is placed on a majestic Maligawa tusker, and is followed by hundreds of other elephants and tuskers.

Kandy, Sri Lanka's tourist town is famous for the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple and its annual festival called Esala Perahera which is marked by ten days of evening parades of “decorated” elephants and cultural dances. Keeping a tradition like the Perahera alive in today's age would require many more hardships apart from walking and dancing barefoot. One such hardship is to arrange for as many elephants for the parade as possible. In perahera an elephant had been tied to his rear feet with iron chains. The chains were too short, thus restraining the animal's limbs from stretching as much as would be required for it to walk comfortably. Every time the elephant tried to take a step forward, its whole body seemed to curve into a ball sort of shape. The elephant was carrying heavy decorative paraphernalia and three fully grown men. Elephants are one of the prime attractions of the parade, yet this elephant's plight was barely noticeable amid the dazzle of fires, the dancers and the crowd of spectators. The Perahera parade once used to feature a few hundred elephants but in recent years,

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their number has dwindled to less than a hundred Perahara, it is certainly an incredible event to watch, but there seems something rather undignified about an elephant dressed up with fairy-lights down its trunk and a battery-pack around its neck.

Mr. Brit who has been volunteering at the Millennium Elephant Foundation, says that “People think that elephants are really strong, but their spine, where the howdah is placed, is not, and it’s damaging to put so much weight in that area,”.

Animal welfare societies explained that what most people who come in the thousands fail to understand is the cruelty imposed on some of these elephants at the hands of their mahouts while taking part in the perahera.

Some witnesses at last year’s perahera have revealed that some of the baby elephants had their legs tied close to each other with nylon cords when taken in the procession. Environmentalists claim that these baby elephants’ legs were tied close together because they were illegally caught from the wild and were not trained to participate in a perahera.

Questions have also being raised by Animal Welfare activists as to why the veterinary surgeon in charge of checking the health of these animals allowed them to be taken in the perahera.

Wildlife Expert and former Deputy Director Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWLC) Dr Nandana Atapattu has told Ceylon Today that if baby elephants were taken in the perahera with their legs tied with nylon cords that is cruelty imposed on the animals. “It is a crime if these baby elephants are taken in the perahera in such conditions because the nylon cord can cut into their skin and cause serious wounds. The veterinary surgeon in charge of checking the status of the elephants before they participate in the perahera should have instructed the mahouts to replace the nylon cords with ropes or to refrain from taking them in the perahera. If an elephant is sick or in musth, it cannot be taken in the perahera. Similarly if the animal’s legs are cross chained it cannot be taken in the perahera. An elephant cannot be taken in the perahera if all four legs of the animal are chained or two legs are chained,” Dr Atapattu has said.

Head of Department of Veterinary Clinical Sciences, University of Peradeniya Dr Ashoka Dangolla said both hind legs of the elephant have to be tied when being taken in a perahera.

“We are promoting the use of loose chains and nylon straps that don’t cut into the skin of the animal. However elephants can run amok during a perahera as they are wild animals and get stressed when they see crowds, flares and the sound of drums. At last year’s Dalada Maligawa perahera four elephants got excited and had to be brought under control,” Dr Dangolla has explained.

Dalada Maligawa Diyawadana Nilame Nilanga Dela has said to Ceylon Today denied that baby elephants were taken in the perahera with their legs tied with nylon cords. “All the elephants taken in the perahera were legal animals and had valid permits. These elephants’ legs have to be tied when they are taken in the procession for safety reasons even though animal welfare activists see this method as cruelty to the animals. If an elephant gets out of control when going in the procession we have to be able to control the animal,”.

Research Problem/Objectives

Using elephants in Perahars is a very traditional thing and generally people are like to see elephants in Perahara. On the other hand when considering the subject of animal cruelty, using elephants in perahara seems elephants are subjected to cruelty. But it is questionable that whether elephants are imposed to the cruelty because of the perahera or not. So our main objective was to collect the public opinion regard to the using elephants in perahera.

Method

This research has done with special reference to Mahanuwara Dalada Perahara. Both primary and secondary data have been used for this research where as questionnaires referred to primary data collection methods. Questionnaires were distributed among 100 people randomly who were watching Mahanuwara Dalada Perahara in 2015. In addition, books, web sites, online magazines were taken as secondary data. Since the collected date were quantitative, data analysis has been done quantitatively.

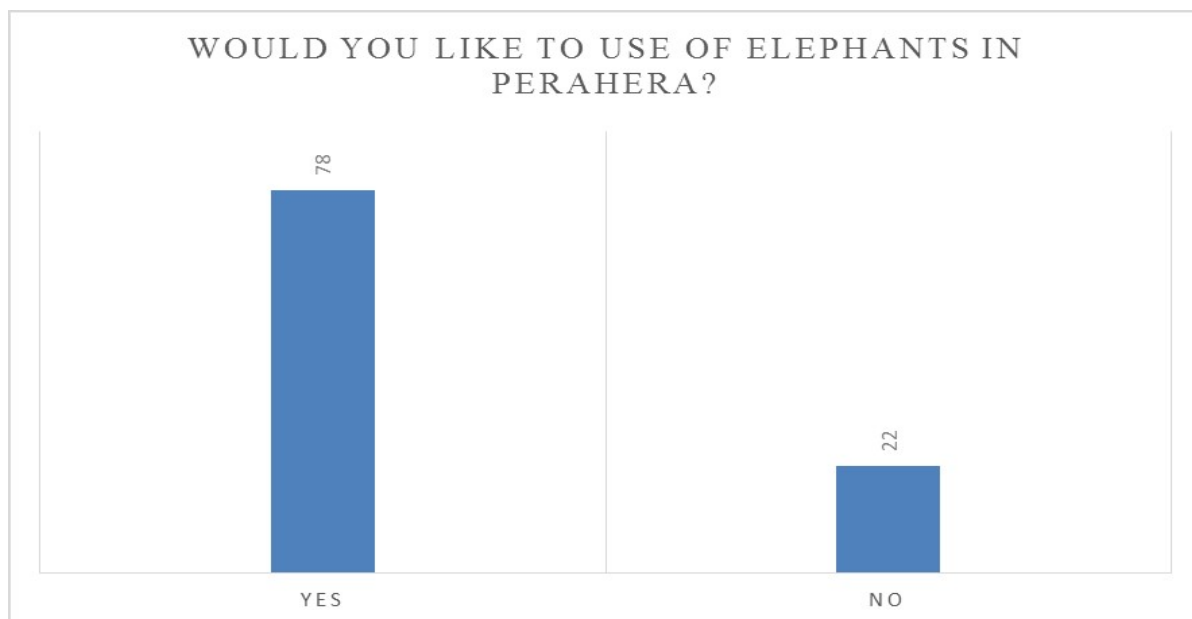
Data and Data Analysis

Following questions are the direct questions that asked to realize the research objective. So only these direct questions and the answers has included.

01. Would you like to use of Elephants in Perahera?

Yes 78

No 22



02. What is the reason for your answer?

Yes 78

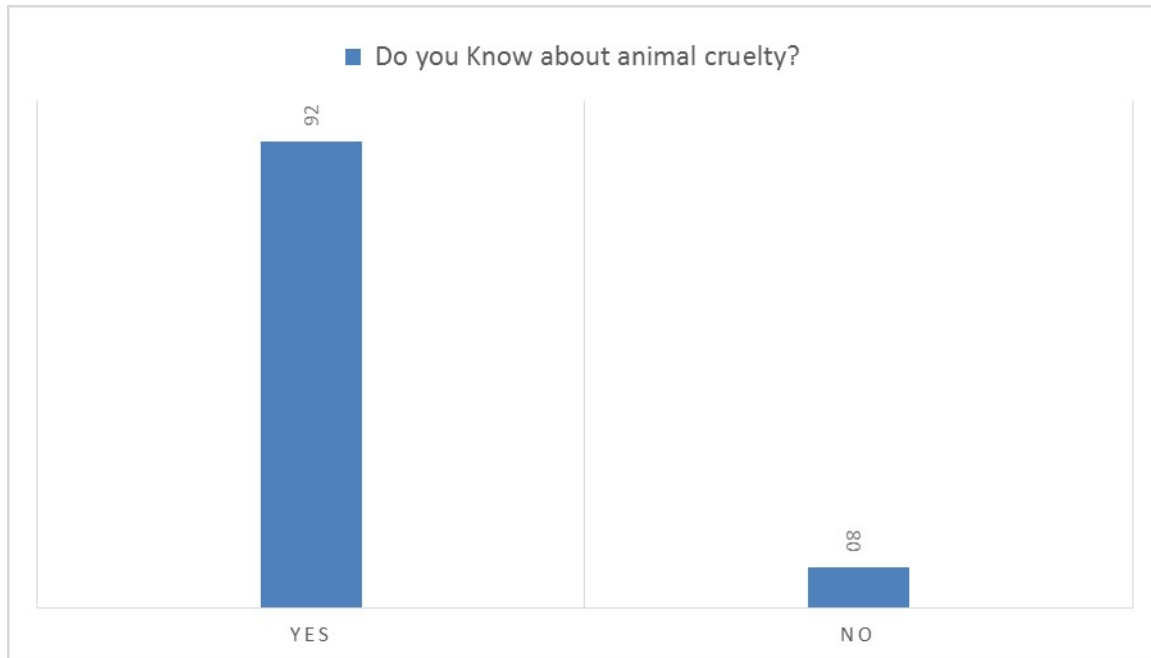
- 01. The Elephant is a Traditional symbol in our culture
- 02. Elephant is Majestic
- 03. From the ancient times elephants are using in perahara
- 04. Elephants are iconic animal in Buddhists religion

No 22

- 01. Using Elephants in Perahara is cruelty against elephants
- 02. We all are against with use of Elephants in Perahera
- 03. Do you know about animal cruelty?

Yes 92

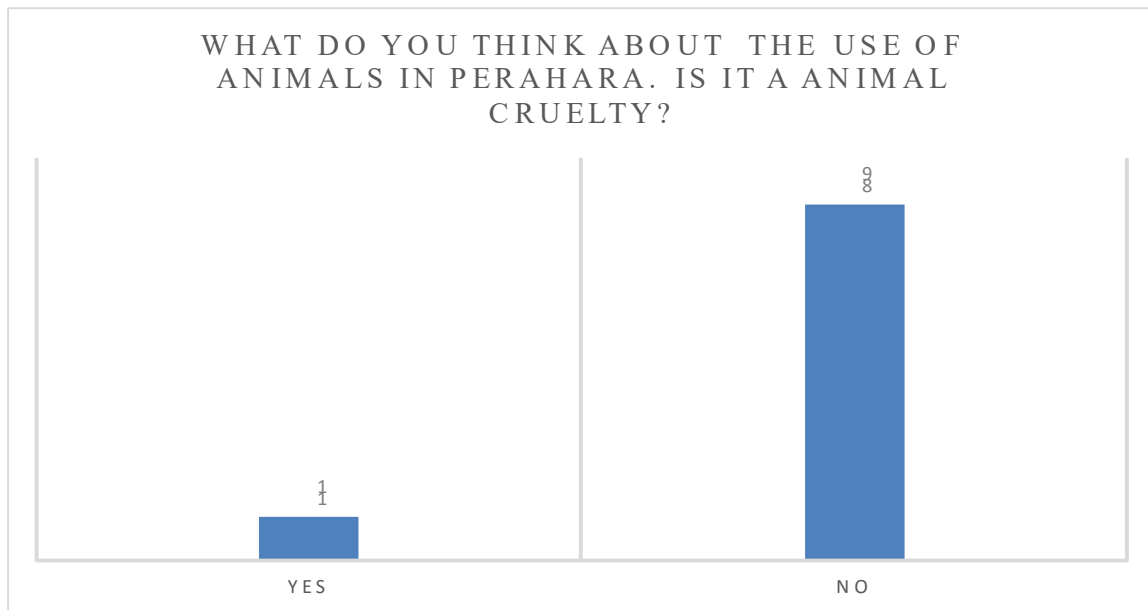
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04. What do you think about using Elephants in Perahara? Is it an Animal cruelty?

Yes 11

No 89



Conclusion

According to the findings, majority of the people like to use elephants for Perahera. They are not agreed with the idea which elephants are imposed to cruelty because of the Perahera and they believed that elephants must use in Perahera continuously.

Because, taking elephants in the perahera is based on the country's religious and cultural aspect. Even though Lord Buddha has being associated with elephants, nowhere in history has it being mentioned that Lord Buddha rode on the back of an elephant. However the sacred tooth relic is carried on the back of a tusker.

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