

Beyond *gaja* and *yānai*: Etymological Significance of Asian Elephant Names used in Sanskrit and Tamil Literature

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ABSTRACT

No animal has appealed to the human psyche as much as the Asian elephant in Indian culture, religion, mythology, folklore and more importantly in written literature spanning over 3,000 years. Mammoth and yet tamable, gentle and yet unpredictable, terrestrial and yet aquatic, quadrupedal and yet 'hands-free', the elephant is indeed a fascinating animal with an alien appearance. If there is one animal that can be named diversely by virtue of its oddities, it is the elephant, and elephant alone. Languages, especially classical ones of great antiquity and literary diversity, invariably have more than one word to mean an animal. Greater a language's antiquity and literary diversity, the higher seem to be the number of words employed to mean an animal, and also the multiple meanings the very names can convey. I looked at the etymological basis for different names used for the elephant in Sanskrit and Tamil, the first two languages to get the distinction of being called classical by the government India. Apart from the two commonly employed words for the elephant in Sanskrit and Tamil, namely *gaja* and *yānai*, there are over 140 and 110 different names for the elephant used in literatures of these respective languages. We see that the elephant's enormous strength, mammoth body size, anatomical peculiarities, behavioural features, grace and beauty, feeding habits and even physiological adaptations have formed the basis for coining these various names. The objective of this paper is to not only see how these names have been coined, but also see how and when newer names appeared, and when the usage of certain names diminished through literary history.

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