

Some Observations on Elephants in Kathāsaritsāgar

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Introduction

India indeed is the home of storytelling. The ocean of stories (Kathāsaritsāgar) is the earliest collection of tales in this part of the world. Its compiler was a Brāhmana named Somadeva. The stories are taken from the Gunāhya's Brhatkathā, probably belonging to the 2000 B.C. There are different types of folk tales in this compilation with thousands of religious and cultural variations, but all these tales share various characteristic features at the most of basic level. Sometimes the tales involve supernatural elements, like the ghosts and gandharvas, topics connected with magic, prostitution, animals etc. Different types of animals also occur in Kathāsaritsāgar, such as rabbits, bears, foxes, lions, rhinoceroses, elephants etc. The Elephant frequently occurs here as performing different roles in various contexts.

In fact, elephant is basically a peace loving and rule-abiding animal which likes to move always with groups of its associates. Seldom it gets irritated and violent due to some unusual reasons. For the human beings, its utility is very important due to which the individuals, who could afford were possessing elephants and making use of the same for different purposes. In India this practice was going on since ancient times. Therefore, it is natural that the human mind has created some myths as well as some beliefs on the nature of this animal, which are reflected in the vast Indian literature starting from the vedic to modern ones. Since the Kathāsaritsāgar is an important Sanskrit text recording various aspects of human life, it contains some descriptions an elephants. Through these descriptions one gets information on various beliefs and practices in association with this animal. The present paper deals with finding out some characteristic features of elephants, which are noticed specifically in some tales in Kathāsaritsāgar.

Let us discuss about the characteristic features of elephants. In this above compilation we observe some qualities of elephants, their utilities and various beliefs about elephants as well.

The Must Elephant

Use of elephants in wars was a regular phenomenon in old days and especially in ancient India. Udayana the king of Vatsa is described to have used many elephants in his war marching against a rival king. All these elephants were having ichor flowing from their temporal pores. After defeating his

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enemy, when he was returning to his kingdom with all his elephants, the poet describes their journey as fallows. The elephants were having huge bodies & they were in great number. From their temporal pores ichor used to flow. Due to their colour & size, the elephants are described as the Vindhya mountain range at the time of rainy season¹. In this context a simple poetic description is given for this large amount of elephants accompanying their master King in the latter's returned journey from the war with victory (Kathā.ii.6).

Ichor is a sainted liquid that usually flows from the frontal space between the eyes and years of the elephants and the same shows the sign of the full growth or adolescent of the same elephant. This texts records frequent use of ichor. Even some women folk of the Bhill tribes were said to make use of ichor collected from the fore head of the elephants as perfume ²(Kathā.xviii.4) .

Use of Gajacarma

There is a story highlighting on hides of elephants. They are so much useful to the human beings that people use to preserve these for longer times. Due to the hard and strong quality of elephants skin the wind, sunshine and water use to cause very little adverse effect over the same. How a person wrapped in an elephant's skin could travel to a foreign country crossing over rivers& ocean, is narrated in this text. Lohajangha a BrāhmaGa young man, being disgusted with his life due to a lost love, once roaming along in the wild country was a searching for a shady place. He found in front of him a body of a dead elephant which had been stripped of all its flesh³. But its skin was enough for the young man to provide a shade and he was lying down on it because he was tired of journey. In fact he crept in to this carcass of which only the skin remained. Latter on there was a heavy rain fall which made the elephant skin contracted. There was no space left for this young man to come out of it who was taking rest inside it. With the heavy rain water flowing along the man with the skin cover was swept into the river Gangā. Then with the current of this river the entire package came into the sea⁴. On the sea water it was floating & with natural waves of the sea it came to the other part of the sea. On the sea shore an eagle saw that hide & tore open the same with its beak. As soon as the eagle found a man inside in it, it fled away& the young man got out of the skin cover. it was like a day dream for him that he could cross the ocean & reached at the other side of the same without his knowledge. Thus the story signifies here, that the skin of an elephant can work wonderfully and often people were making use of the same for their own benefit (Kathā.ii.4) .

Elephant's use in war

The poet described Udayana's preparation to fight a battle against the king of Banaras namely Brahmadutta. The king Udayana first marched against Brahmadutta in the eastern quarter having mounted a tall victorious elephants with a lofty umbrella on its back⁵. This is described in the

¹ tatonuyāto nāgendraihi sravadbhihi madanirjharānanurāgāgataihi vindhya prāgbhāgaihiriva jamgamaihi Kathā.ii.6.11.

² vāsansi barhiapichhāni hāra gunjāphalasarajagamadanico yatra strīnā ca mandanam Kathā.xviii.4. 50.

³ tarumprāpnuvamsottha lebhe hasikalevaramjaghanena praviśāntarnirmamsamjambukaih krtam Kathā. ii.4.108.

⁴ tenāparutya Gangāyāmkcepi gajacharma tattatjalaughena nītvā ca samudrāntarnyadyat Kathā ii.4.112.

text as a furious lion ascending a mountain with one tree in full bloom on it. And his elephants with their ears like white cowries, and with streams of ichor flowing from their temples reddened by being mixed with vermilion, appeared, like the sons of the mountains, streak with white clouds of autumn, and pouring down streams of water coloured with red mineral, sent by the parents hill⁶(Kathā.iii.5).

The story of King Ratnadhpati and the white elephant Śvetaraśmi

There are stories narrated in this text which show various natures and utilities of Elephants. One comes across a story on white elephant quite helpful for human beings and it bears some noble character. There is striking connection between the chastity of a woman and good nature of an elephant. There was a white elephant, who was originally a Gandharva and got this elephant form due to a curse of a hermit. The elephant is known as Śvetaraśmi⁷. This animal is quite wise, can fly in the sky and always remains dutiful as well as loyal to its master. A king namely Ratnadhpati performed a severe penance, propitiated to VicGu who favoured him by arranging a white elephant to serve the king. The said king got his desire fulfilled with the help of this elephant⁸. Once while the king was returning to his own island mounting on the elephant, Garuda the best of the eagles struck that elephant with his beak, and the animal fell down on the ground. It remained on the same place without any movement as if it is dead. After five days there was a voice heard from the sky instructing the king for taking a remedial measure to revive the elephant. The advice was to bring a truly chaste woman with whose touch the elephant would rise up and the king tried for the same. A great many numbers of ladies touched the elephants but none could help the elephant revive. By this incident the king was surprised and ashamed to know that all these ladies were proved to be unchaste. Then a merchant while moving through that island came to know the above events. He had his wife namely Śīlavati who was known to be very chaste. She was willing to touch the elephant in order to revive it. The king and her husband allowed her to touch and to everybody's astonishment, the elephant raised its head (Kathā.vii.2).

The purpose of this story is to highlight the importance of the power of chastity. But the noble elephant, after getting a touch from a chaste lady when got itself revived, it suggests that the noble character and life of this elephant has some connection with the chastity of woman. One can simply say in this regard that nobleness of an elephant can be compared with the pure character of woman, both of these are supposed to remain loyal and dutiful to their master or husband. Indirectly the same story can be considered as an example of elephants who are basically peace loving of good nature and helpful animals those are ever devoted to their owners at all circumstances.

Elephant jewels & Kunjaramani

In another story one finds that one of the mythical elephants is called a jewel. The king Naravahandutta being advised by the sage Vamadeva entered inside a cave in the Malay Mountain in order to win over five jewels. Out of which the first one is an elephant. The king after entering inside the

⁵ ārūah prochritachhatram jayakunjaram | girim praphullaiktaram mrendra iva durmadah Kathā iii.5.63.

⁶ vāranāścha asya sitasravanacāmarādavigaladgaGdasindūraoGadānjalāh pathihi Kathā iii.5.68.

⁷ samutpanno gajah svetah svetaraśmihriti srutah Kathā vii.2.13

cave had to overcome many obstacles. Inside it he saw a huge furious elephant roaring terribly after looking at him. It charged the king as well, but the king smote the elephant by means of striking with his heavy fist on its forehead. When the elephant was found to be subdued by his strike the king mounted on it. Then there was a voice in the sky declaring the king's winning over the jewel of the mighty elephant⁹. Latter on it is said in this text that with this elephant's jewel the king Naravahandutta dispelled all the elephants of the quarters who were causing obstacles on his achievements¹⁰ (Kathā.xv.1). In this context one can simply add that the word Gajamauktika or Kunjarmani, one type of pearl is mentioned in this text. It is believed that the same is found either from the brain, or forehead or stomach of the elephants ¹¹(Kathā.iv.2).

Importance of Tusks

The most valuable part of the elephants is its tusk. In the old and medieval age people used to prepare various ornaments and furniture out of the tusk of the elephants. It bears the quality of remaining strong and dazzling for quite a longer time. Due to this quality it always maintains a high price in the market. In the text of 'the ocean of stories' there are various contexts where elephants' tusks are said to be used for preparing furniture's & ornaments as well as weapons. Mostly the Bhillas, a tribal community, is famous to use the same either as ornament or weapon. Wherever they roam they carry it along with them. At least in the fourth TaraEgs of the 18th LaAbaka one gets more than one references of the Bhilla's using tusks of elephants¹².

In 18th LaAbaka of the fourth TaraEga, one chief of the Bhilla's namely Ekakikeśarin is narrated to have covered the high walls of his dwelling with ivory. This description suggests that the Bhilla's and their masters were very rich in possession of a large number of tusks from the then available elephants¹³.

The story of elephant name Kuvalayapida as a Guardian of Kingdom

For the practical use of elephants one gets a reference from a story given in Kathasaritasagar. There was a king namely Chandraloka. He had a pet elephant called Kuvalayapida which was famous for leading in the warfare & protecting the kingdom. This elephant used to serve the king as well as his son namely Taraloka¹⁴. The enemies of Taraloka, in order to defeat him played a trick by managing to ask the elephant from him as a gift. They knew the prince would not hesitate to give anything that has been asked for and they succeeded in their evil intention by separating Kuvalayapida from his kingdom¹⁵. Finally the prince, being to powerless and grief stricken left the kingdom and went to forest. This last moment's miseries of Taraloka started from his giving away Kuvalayapida as a gift which was actually considered to be inevitable for the king, kingdom as well as the subjects (Kathā.xvi.3).

⁸. tamāruhya gajam svetam surebhamiva vajrabst Kathā vii.2.16

⁹. Sādhusidham mahāhastiratnam te cakravartinah d itī vānī guhāmadhyādaūarīrodabhuttadā Kathā xv.1.19.

¹⁰. Diggajena hastiratnena ... nirvaryā saha senaya d uttīrya tām guhām chodagdvarēna saviviryayau Kathā xv.1.85-86.

¹¹. Tātaḥ sātiūayam prāptam muktāsāram samatkstam sa matkste ddhanurdvityah prayayau gajānhantum himācalam

¹². Kathā iv.2.76.

¹³. tasyāgrāddakcinam pārūvamahūhya ca dūrataḥ d dantiduttājincitā bhillpallirvilokayan Kathā xii.35.42.

Artificial Elephant use in war

In the 12th chapter (TaraEga) of the first LaAbaka there is mentioning of artificial elephants . This is mostly used in the context of warfare. One king namely Chandamahasena, considering himself inferior to the king of Vatsa namely Udayana, wanted to capture the latter by means of a trick. He prepared an artificial elephant of a huge body¹⁶. Inside the body of this, he put some warriors concealed and placed the elephant in the Vindhya forest. Udayana was fond of elephant catching¹⁷. Some of his followers considering this elephant as a real one informed Udayana. Then the king wanted to capture this wild elephant & came to Vindhya forest. Having stationed his followers at a distant place he alone came near the elephant & tried to please and entertain the same artificial elephant having taken it for a real one. Suddenly the warriors hidden inside the body of the elephant came out & captured Udayana, who was a latter on brought near Chandamahasena. Thus the importance of elephants in the battle field was so great that sometimes warriors used to cheat their opponents by means of creating artificial elephants.

Selection of the King by using the discriminating power of pet elephants

There was an immemorial custom prevailing in those days of taking the help of an experienced domestic elephant in selecting a suitable person for ruling a kingdom in case of the kingdom becomes devoid of a ruler. If any king becomes old without having any son or progeny to succeed him in throne, then that king desperately needs to select another individual to become his successor.

For that purpose the judicious thoughts of the most noble of this elephant's come to his aid. In other words the best of the elephants plays a vital role in the selection of the future king in many parts of the Indian continent. Such a story is noticed in the ocean of the stories.

There was a son of a rich merchant. He was believed to be an incarnation of Lord Buddha, Bodhisattva. He was married .After the death of his mother, his father started living with another lady and the young couple left their house in disgust. The noble nature of the young man was endearing everybody. The couple had faced very much difficult situations for their basic needs like food, drink and shelter. During their roaming days the husband had gone through much hardship for feeding his wife and keeping her alive by sacrificing his own flesh and blood. It was because, he was born as an incarnation of the bodhisattva, whose basic nature is full of compassion. On their eighth day of difficult journey they found a man whose hand and legs were cut. The person was being carried away by the currents of mountain's stream. The young man being compassionate lender a helping hand to that unfortunate fellow & rescued him from the streams. He also allowed him to leave with his family, since that man was not having any shelter to stay nor having anything to mentain himself. All these three while staying in the same place were maintaining their livelihood only by the efforts of the young man who used to collect roots and fruits from the forest for the purpose of feeding all of them. One day when he was outs in the woods his wife fell in love with that maimed man. She was so much infatuated with the

¹⁴apasyâma ca tattasy sadanam œabariv[tam | dantidantcittottungabhitti vyâghrchhavih Kathâ xviii.4.49.

¹⁵Abhucca vâranatasya parasenâvimardanah | mahâkuvalyâpîa itikhyâto mahitale Kathâ xvi.3.19.

¹⁶dattah kuvalayâpîah paûyârthino mahâgajah Kathâ xvi.3.44.

¹⁷âkârayat swasadeûam mahântam yantrahastim Kathâ ii.4.4.

young guest, that she not only was determined to leave her husband but also took efforts to kill her husband, so that she could live freely with that mutilated man. By some wicked tricks, she managed put her husband down in the deep currents of a river in the mountains and thought to have got rid of him. Then managed to arrange their livelihood by begging at door to door while carrying her paramour on her back.

That man incarnation of bodhisattva not being dead, floated away by the currents of river and managed to climb up on a firm ground on a bank of the river. Due to tiredness and hunger he was lying on the ground. In the meantime, the king of that city died. His subjects were searching for their future king by means of an auspicious elephant¹⁸. They along with the elephant came near the merchant's son lying on the bank of the river. The elephant just after looking at him took up that young man and put on his back¹⁹. The citizens took him to their capital and made him their king. Later on his wife while begging through streets came to meet the king and recognised him as her husband. She requested to come back to his life again. But the noble young man remembering all her wicked deeds declared the same in front of all. That lady was punished by the members of the court of the king (Kathā.x.9).

The young man's going through hardships and finally becoming a king of a land, All these might have been due to his virtues. But this story provides here an example of a some elephants of good nature, who could recognise the virtues of individuals through their gifted power of discrimination .In that way their thinking faculty can be consider just next to human beings.

Conclusion

The basic nature of Kathāsaritsāgar is to narrate stories by means of which some moral teachings can be imparted to common people. These stories may not show the elephants and some aspects of the animals as highlighting point. But for a reader seeking various aspects of elephants from this text it is needed to go through such stories where something about elephants is narrated. There are a huge number of such references out of which very few are taken into consideration in the above pages. Such an attempt simply stands to show the richness of literary evidence in the Sanskrit literature on this gigantic animal ever helpful to the human beings.

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¹⁸ Tam cāntarvīrapurucaih kstvā channairadhicmitam dvidhyāmyām sa niddhe rājā yantramayamgajam Kathā ii.4.5.

¹⁹ yanmngalagaja pauraih bhramyamānaharena yam jāropayati pscme sve sotra rājyebhiccyata Kathā x.9.24.

²⁰ Sa dhairyatucmo dhāteva bhramanprāptontikam gaja | utcipyāropayāmāsa sva pscme tam vanikasutam Kathā x.9.25.