

## **The Plight of Asian Elephants between the Gods and Humans**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Wherever elephants and people coexist, various interactions are inevitable. In Asia, elephants and humans have been in intensive contact for thousands of years so the significance of elephants to people has become more complex and unique than other parts of the world. Besides being hunted for food by pre-agricultural man, the elephants assumed a new significance to the agricultural man. It became a beast of burden, an instrument of war, an object of reverence, a status symbol, an agricultural pest, and a resource to be exploited for the beauty of its ivory. The elephant in Asia embodies great metaphysical importance and is considered unique among other domestic animals. Traditionally for over 3,000 years, Asian elephants have been driven to other areas or captured and trained for use in work, ceremony, and war. Perhaps 100,000 wild elephants were captured over the last century with estimates of two to four million captured throughout the history of domestication. Asian cultures recognize the Asian elephant as a symbolic animal. Elephants often symbolize wisdom, strength, and sacredness as the largest land animal. They are considered to be charismatic, wise, majestic, brave, and patient in Asian cultures; there are thousands of stories about elephants. As cultural and natural heritages, elephants played important roles in the history and life of both the religious and ruling communities, as well as in legends and folklore of society in general. Examples include historical and religious documents as well as relief sculptures on the walls of ruins. The Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*), an endangered species listed in Appendix I of CITES, is thought to number between 34,000 to 56,000 in thirteen Asian countries. Karnataka state in southern India supports a globally significant—and the country's largest—population of the Asian elephant *Elephas maximus*. A reliable map of Asian elephant distribution and measures of spatial variation in their abundance, both vital needs for conservation and management action, are unavailable not only in Karnataka, but across its global range.

There are several myths related to elephants in Indian literature. The most popular belief indicating the sign of conception in womanhood by the visit of a snake in her dream (traceable not only in India but also in different parts of the world with slight variations) was directly transferred to the elephant (Zimmer, 1962). Thus, in the Buddhist legend the Buddha is said to have left Tusita heaven and was conceived by his mother Maya or Mahamaya in a dream who saw him descending from the heaven in the form of a white

elephant. Sen (1972) observes that a similar type of legend is also connected with the birth of Mahavira whose mother, Trisala, is reported to have had a dream of a four-tusked elephant when she conceived the said saviour. But, as the elephant ultimately became the symbol of the Buddha who is said to have descended to the earth in the form of an elephant saddanta according to tradition, it ceased to be a sign of conception for the common woman although it still remained the symbol of fecundation for the divine female.