

Elephant Taxidermy in Sri Lanka

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In the history of Sri Lanka, there are only two junctures where elephants are held in the highest regard. One is named Kandula where the royal elephant of great Sinhala King Dutugamunu and the other one is an elephant who is figured as a national treasure after nearly two thousands of years from the first, named Raja, the elephant belonging to the most precious temple of the Buddhists, the temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic in Kandy. Elephant Raja was the luckiest elephant as he carried the Sacred Relic on his back in annual Esala Pageant for nearly forty years where thousands of devotees worshipped the same.

During those days, capturing of elephants was an art and the livelihood of a certain clan of Muslims from Batticaloa. These professionals used to operate elephant kraals under license from the government at a time when elephants were becoming hard to come by, as their numbers were steadily decreasing. Most had fallen victim to the European ivory hunters and the others had been rounded up during the numerous kraals in the preceding years.

A person called Umerulebbe of Eravur was one of those professionals who had been operating in the jungles in the vicinity of Batticaloa, in early November 1925. His men had been successful in capturing two baby tuskers of the same size within a few days of each other. It was a rare feat even in the best of kraals of the previous century.

One-day morning of the month of December in the same year News had arrived that the tuskers had been dispatched by train to the Kadugannawa railway station and everyone was eager to have the first glimpse of them. They were purchased by a person named Tkiribanda Mampitya Disawe of Giragama Walauwa in Kandy of a sum of rupees three thousand, a princely sum in those days. They had been sent via Vallachchenai, Topawewa and Polgahawela under a license numbered 1318 which had been issued by the Government Agent (GA) of the Northern Province on 30th November 1925. Person named Arambegama Kirhamy had been the keeper of the Mampitya Disawe's "she" elephant at the time Disawe purchased two baby tuskers time he has taken the she elephant to the railway station to welcome the baby tuskers. The two baby tuskers were named as Raja and Kandu and spend several years in Giragama and there is no doubt that everyone in Waluwa was proud of them. In the year 1936 Tkiribanda Mampitya Disawe decided to donate these tuskers to Sri Dalada Maligawa.

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As a result of the generous donation by Mampitiya Disawe on 22nd August 1937, people of Kandy were fortunate to witness the festivities relating to great individual acts of devotion to the Buddha Sasana.

At that time, there were four more important festivals coming down from the nation's cultural heritage for which their services were available throughout the year. The first of these was the annual 'Aluth Sal Mangalya' the new rice festival. The second was the "Avurudu Mangalya" or the New Year festival. The annual 'Karthi Mangalya' the festival in honor of God Kataragama came next. Last but not the least the Esala Perahera the annual pageant. All these festivals are still continuing with highest regard.

Among the said festivals, the Kandy Esala *Perahera* (the *Esala* procession of Kandy) is a grand festival celebrated with elegant costumes and is held in months of July and August. This historical procession is held annually to pay homage to the Sacred of Lord Buddha, which is housed at the Sri Dalada Maligawa in Kandy. A unique symbol of Sri Lanka, the procession consists of many traditional local dances such as fire-dances, whip-dances, Kandyan dances and various other cultural dances, in addition to the elephants who are usually adorned with lavish garments and Raja and Kandu was not mature enough to join the procession at that time and they spend several years as dale elephants. After sometime Raja was trained to the task of carrying the casket. He was regalia, magnificent and graceful parading the streets of Kandy during the great pageant.

Raja was a symbol of the nation's cultural heritage and he projected this culture and life style in a way no human being could have done. The fame and publicity he earned for his motherland would certainly would be the envy of many a human, for few could achieve recognition for his country with such grace, magnificence, and dignity.

Once he trained he has done his job with utmost respect and one night the pageant had warned its way down Dalada Veediya a few yards beyond the late bund when Raja stopped in his tracts. No amount of coaxing from the mahouts would make Raja take one more step. The Perahera was at a standstill. Unable to comprehend this strange behavior, the mahouts stood perplexed when a Vidane sent by the Diyawadana Nilame Cuda Babdara Nugawela Disawe.

They were amazed to see that a strap of the casket had given away and had Raja taken another step, that would have resulted in a calamity. The entire 'hauda' with the venerated relic casket would have come down.

Elephants are reputed for their intelligence but Raja's intelligence surpassed that of most of his species. His conscientiousness gave one the impression that.

Raja had taken the journey to fame in his stride and knew he was the most admired, popular and sort after personality in the entire pageant.

He had grown to be a strong, virile and youthful specimen that won the admiration of the multitude, and then to be the sedate, experienced and senior partner in the nation's greatest cultural event, where he earned in abundance salutations, respect and gratitude of the people.

By April 1982 Raja had begun to show signs of waste decay and sickness. Deep seated and gangrenous wounds in his right external ear and wounds on his fore limbs and hind legs had been a source for much concern among the authorities at the “Maligawa”

Raja Pathological tests had revealed that Raja’s heart, liver and kidneys were in reasonably good condition. But Raja was suffering from Rheumatic Arthritis too. Nevertheless, he was in competent and caring hands and was quickly on his way to recovery.

Elephants participating in the procession of Maligawa have to satisfy following health aspects;

- (i) Age approx. 65 years
- (ii) Body weight approx. 4000 kg

Phenotypic characters of this “Tusker” closely resembles those described for the caste “Mangala” in MahaGajaLakshanaSangarahaya (DERENIYAGALA, 1955)

In 1982 the tusker Raja fell seriously ill following an infection of the right ear flap. As diagnosed the tip of the ear was necroses, it was decided to remove the affected part by surgery.

In October 1985, the tusker had a swelling of the left elbow, and Hematological analysis revealed that it was not an infection. Degenerative changes in the joint due to age (Osteoarthritis). Undigested foliage which was an indicator of wasting and decay of the teeth (Molars).

The Kandy Perahera from the time of the Sinhalese Kings has been a religious cum cultural event organized to mark the annual Esala festival. The casket containing the sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha is taken in his procession for veneration by the Buddhists who come in their thousand to witness this great cultural pageant. For half century raja had treated the path fame and glory and had done great service. Raja died in July 1988 due to an illness and after his death it was taxidermied by the taxidermy department of Colombo museums. 156,350.00 as estimated by us, was granted from the Presidents’ Fund for the taxidermy of ‘Raja’ the Maligawa Tusker.

After the death of the famous Maligawa Raja in 1988 Heiyantuduwe Raja served the longest period but by the millennium, they were too old or worn out. Wewaladeniye Raja became one of the four tuskers to be able to perform the duty of bearing the sacred casket.

Millangoda Raja

Millangoda Raja was captured in Arnamadawa Nawagathtegama jungle in Puttalam District. It was captured in 1945 by Millangoda Appuhamy and his friends, of Molagoda, Kegalle. It was about 3-4 years when they were captured. Millangoda Raja was gigantic and majestic in appearance but he is not an aggressive animal. It never hurt to a single person. But little rough.

Millangoda Raja participated in Kandy Esala perahara nearly 40 years .and also carried the casket of the Tooth Relic. Millangoda Raja was believed to be having the longest tusks in the Asian region. It is a sweet lover and it loves to eat jaggery and toffees. In its late life it suffered from food indigestion for more than one year. The tusker died on 30th July 2011 and was about to seventy years old at the time of his death.

Taxidermy is an art. It is a Greek word for arranging skins. It has been done in an Early primed time. Taxidermy specimens are used for museum displays and for study prepress as specimen. Identification and preservation. This technique was used in 17 century in early age of taxidermy was used several harmful chemicals for preserving animals.

In conducting taxidermy, the quality of the specimen is the first aim. The skinning part must be done before the expiry of 12 hours after death. The skin removing is done in a scientific way. In large mammals, the accurate scientific measurements is a must in taxidermy. Removing skins to be tanned and treated after being removed from the carcass. The original skull and leg bones of specimen are used for mounting. The model cast preparation is a large task. After molding, the skin is wetted in a chemical bath and stitched to the mold glass eyes are used and the touching process is done in the best mounted animal.

The above two elephants are very precious elephants in Sri Lanka and those stuffed specimens are displayed for public at present.

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