

Report on the inspection of captive elephant named 'Gomathy' maintained in Arulmigu Mahalingaswamy Temple, Thiruvudaimaruthur, Kumbakonam as per the Direction issued by the Hon'ble High Court, Madras on 27 Nov 2019 in W.P.No. 28793 of 2013

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As directed by the Hon'ble High Court, Madras on 27 Nov 2019 in W.P.No. 28793 of 2013, I inspected the captive elephant named 'Gomathy' maintained in Arulmigu Mahalingaswamy Temple, Thiruvudaimaruthur, Kumbakonam on 13 Dec 2019. I also visited the Mayurranathaswamy Temple in Mayiladthurai on the same day to check on the 'other' elephant named 'Avayambal' which is also managed by the ninth respondent temple in the W.P. 28793. My report is as follows

INSPECTION REPORT

Report on captive elephant: Gomathy (maintained in Arulmigu Mahalingaswamy Temple, Thiruvudaimaruthur, Kumbakonam)

I visited the Arulmigu Mahalingaswamy Temple, Thiruvudaimaruthur, Kumbakonam on 13 Dec 2019 where the captive elephant 'Gomathy' is maintained by the temple authorities. I was accompanied by the following people during the inspection

1. Mr. S. Gurusamy (Divisional Forest Officer, Thanjavur Division)
2. Dr. A. Kumaraguru (member, Captive Elephant Welfare and Management District Level Committee, Thanjavur)
3. Mr. A. Sarvanan (Range Forest Officer, Kumbakonam)
4. Mr. V. Singaravelu (Forester, Kumbakonam)
5. Mr. R. Murugesan (Forest Guard, Kumbakonam)

The following temple authorities were present during the inspection and they provided all necessary details during the inspection

1. Mr K. K. Subramanian, Superintendent, Mahalingaswamy Temple, Thiruvudaimaruthur
2. Mr S. Baskaran, Mahalingaswamy Temple, Thiruvudaimaruthur
3. Mr C. Santhanakrishnan
4. Mr Thiyagaraj (mahout)
5. Mr B. Sodhakar (mahout)

In addition I discussed the matter (over phone) with former Forest Veterinary Officer Dr. N. S. Manoharan (currently Regional Joint Veterinary Services, Animal Husbandry Department) who also had inspected the same captive elephant 'Gomathy' earlier and given a report to the Chief Conservator of Forests Thanjavur Circle on 13 May 2019.

1. Health of the elephant

- a. Based on information from the temple authorities the captive elephant Gomathy was 8 years old when the temple acquired it in 1972, which would indicate that it is 65 years old. It shows signs of old age but is physically active and strong.
- b. The overall body condition is good and elephant appears healthy
- c. It does not have any external injuries or deformities and appears to be physically fine. We watched it walking and its walk was normal, energetic and quick indicating no physical problems in walking.
- d. A earlier report (13 May 2019) by Dr. N.S Manoharan (Regional Joint Director Veterinary Services, Animal Husbandry Department) indicates the elephant is in good health.
- e. Feeding: As per information given by the mahouts and temple authorities the elephant is fed 7 kg of concentrates (rice, grams, jiggery, etc) each morning and evening (total 14kg). In addition, adequate green fodder in the form of grasses, sugarcane toppings (leaves), Palmyra tree leaves, etc are also given. Feeding is adequate for an elephant of this size as seen from its good body condition.
- f. Temple authorities informed me that the health of the elephant was monitored by the local Asst. Veterinary Surgeon (Dr Anand Kumar) from the Animal Husbandry Department on a monthly basis. However, Mr S. Gurusamy, the Divisional Forest Officer, Thanjavur, informed me that although the Forest Department had requested the temple authorities for a monthly report on the health of the elephant, no report has been given in the past five months.

2. Shelter and bathing facilities for the elephant:

- a. Two shelters (sheds) have been provided for the elephant at two different locations, one is just inside the temple entrance and the other is outside the temple approximately 50 meters away from the entrance of the temple.
 - i. The shelter inside the temple is about 20 x 35 and as it is an open structure this size is fine for holding the elephant for a short time. However, this shelter is used for keeping the elephant for display and as such the elephant is tethered here for long periods during the day. As the shelter has a tin roof it would be hot during the afternoon due to the radiated heat from the tin roof. As this shelter is next to the entrance there is a constant flow of devotees passing in front of it when they enter the temple. There is no barrier to separate the devotees and the elephant and only the mahout is there to ensure that people do not approach it too closely.
 - ii. The shelter outside the temple is approximately 20 x 30 feet in size, it is a walled structure with a gate closing the front and the side walls have no openings and there is a small entrance in the rear wall. This also has a tin roofs but the temple authorities have installed thatching (above and below the

tin sheet) to ensure that it does not heat up in the sun. Overall it is a very congested place for an elephant.

- b. A shower (overhead sprinklers) system has been established for bathing the elephant.
- c. We were also shown a 40 x 70 meter walled compound adjoining a school as a possible alternate site for tethering the elephants. The site has a few trees for shade. We were also shown the school playground which has many trees as a possible tethering site for the elephant. We were told this would only be available during the summer vacation of the school, as it is not possible to tie the elephant in the playground when the children are around.

3. Handling of the elephant:

- a. The elephant has killed one person (a devotee visiting the temple) in a situation that clearly appears to be accidental. As when it is tethered inside the temple the front and hind leg are chained with short chains giving very little room for movement.
- b. The elephant obeys the mahouts and they are able to control it with only a small stick (did not use an ankush when I was there). There did not appear to be any problems between the mahouts (two of them were present) and the elephant and handling was good.

4. Living condition of the elephant:

- a. The elephant is tied inside the temple from 7:30 am to 12pm (4.5 hours) in the morning and then again in the evening from 4 pm to 8 pm (4 hours). During this period the elephant's fore and hind legs are chained and the elephant cannot move more than a few feet back and front or sideways. Hence the elephant is tied to one spot with very little room for movement for 8.5 to 9 hours.
- b. Once its activity (or lack of it) in the temple is completed the elephant is taken to the shelter outside the temple and tied there between 12 to 4 pm in the afternoon and again throughout the night. During the afternoon only the front leg is tied but again given the small size of the shelter and the short chain length, the elephant cannot move more than a few feet. The elephant is again tied inside this shelter during the night and its movements are even more restricted as its hind leg is also tied at night.
- c. For almost the entire day and night the elephant is just standing on one spot with nothing to do and unable to even move more than a few feet.
- d. The only time the elephant gets for free movement is during the morning and even walks. The mahouts take it out for an early morning and late evening (night) walk around the temple premises which offers a 1 km long circuit and the elephant walks 3 – 4 times along this path for exercise in the morning and night. This would be monotonous activity for the elephant, but still a welcome change from being chained to one spot throughout the day and night.
- e. Female elephants are highly social animals and live in strongly bonded families made up of related females and their young, a matriarchal society. There is constant communication and interaction between family members in the elephant society.

Elephants are also highly intelligent animals. It therefore not right to keep elephants alone, especially females who have evolved over millions of years to live in closely bonded families. The “other” elephant maintained by the ninth respondent temple and mentioned in the Hon’ble High Court’s direction is ‘Avayambal’, it is in Mayurranathaswamy temple about 10-15 km away in the town of Mayiladuthurai. As such the two elephants are widely separated and have no contact or interaction.

Recommendation for captive elephant Gomthy

1. The Forest Department’s elephants are officially given retirement when they become old and from then on they are fed rations, given medical care and managed till they die of old age. Gomathy is 65 years old and well beyond retirement age but is still put on display (duty) the whole day through.
2. With the exception of the morning and evening walk (3-4 km). Gomathy has been tethered with a short chain which allows only a few feet of movement and no activity for 57 long years. For an intelligent, wide ranging and highly social animal this would possibly be the worst punishment, like a life imprisonment in solitary confinement.
3. Taking its extremely poor quality of life for nearly 6 decades and its age I would suggest that Gomathy be transferred to the M.R. Palayam Elephant Rescue and Rehabilitation Centre of the Tamil Nadu Forest Department. In this regard the following points need to be taken into consideration
 - a. Although the elephant is very old, it is in good health and has no physical deformities or problems. As such a journey of 90 km in a truck would not be a problem for this elephant.
 - b. Due to its age, different health issues can arise and these are best dealt with by Veterinary doctors who have experience in managing health issues in wild animals (free ranging and captive). This type of experience and skill will only be available in the Forest Department, which has over a 100 years experience in managing captive elephants. Such experience and elephant specific knowledge and skills will not be available with junior veterinary doctors from the Animal Husbandry Department. So moving Gomathy to M. R. Palayam will be beneficial from the health point of view. The fact that the temple authorities were unable to send the elephant to the annual rejuvenation camp for elephants shows that instead of increased health care in old age, care is actually declining.
 - c. There are already 4 other elephants there at the M. R. Palayam Elephant Rescue and Rehabilitation Centre and these will provide the companionship Gomathy has missed for decades. The social environment in M. R. Palayam centre will be highly conducive to the well being of this old elephant.
 - d. As per the Central Zoo Authority, captive elephant require at least 1.2 ha, but this implies area over which the elephant can roam around. Habitat enrichment is also suggested. The temple and the mahouts do not have the skills to let an elephant free

range as they have been habituated to decades of just chaining the elephant. Although, one of the sites (adjoining the school) shown to us by the temple authorities has shade trees, it will be difficult to release an unchained elephant next to a school. There is adequate space and the scope for free ranging in M. R. Palayam centre, so Gomathy will finally have the opportunity to move around freely.

- e. Taking all these into consideration, it would be best to transfer Gomathy to the M.R. Palayam centre.
4. The costs of transport and also maintenance of the elephant should be borne by the temple.
 - a. As even the government technically pay pension (life time care) for captive elephants managed by them. Hence it should also be the social responsibility of temples which keep elephants to pay for their care when they become old, rather than use the approach of 'working them till they die'.
 - b. The temple authorities felt that the elephant was needed because it added grandeur and impact by its presence. Elephants are also seen as representatives of Lord Ganesha. Thus it would only be fitting that they now extend support for the elephant which has given them decades of service.