



CONNECTING THE DOTS

**Root cause of human fatalities caused by
captive elephants.**



Published by Elsa Foundation

India

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Current Limited Edition: May 2023

About us:

Elsa Foundation is a non-profit charitable trust that focuses on the conservation of biodiversity, prevention of cruelty to animals and animal rights issues of both domestic and wild animals. It opposes keeping wild animals in captivity.

We have travelled to several countries to study best practices and implement them in India.

The foundation supports various government bodies, in informed policy-making and decision-making on critical issues impacting biodiversity and the rights of animals.

Our work areas are research, advocacy, awareness, publication, support in policy and decision-making.

Website: www.elsafoundationcharity.org

Cover photo: A temple elephant that was tortured, beaten, abused and threatened by the mahout

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Executive Summary

When news about a captive elephant fatalities a human is seen in newspapers and media, people assume that it happened suddenly on a particular day, but if the root cause of the fatalities are analyzed, it leads to a horrifying story of

- Torture and abuse of the elephants by the mahouts and facilitators of captivity
- The majority of the mahouts are alcohol addicts. Under the influence of alcohol, they brutally attack elephants
- Unnatural living conditions
- Cruel solitary life isolating it from its natal herd
- Chained permanently without any opportunity for even a minimum movement,
- Lack of nutritious diet, lack of medical treatment
- Cannot sit or lie down on the floor for resting / sleeping in their lifetime.
- Severe pain and arthritis in legs due to continuous standing in their entire life

More details can be found in the document titled “Living conditions of the temple, private elephants. Solution to the problems” published by the foundation.

Elephants kept in this condition undergo very high stress. Initially, they exhibit this stress through certain reactions such as mild attacks on mahouts (or) devotees visiting the temple etc.

In many cases, this preliminary reaction is ignored and the animal is not provided with any relief and is forced to suffer in the same scenario.

Finally, some of the elephants unable to bear the torture, as a last resort, cause loss of life of the mahout (or) a devotee (or) any general public

The above facts are proved by the case studies of four captive elephants in Tamil Nadu

Recommendations are given at the end of this report to avoid any such fatalities in future.

Captive elephants analysed in the case studies

- **Deivanai (Thiruparankundram temple, Madurai),**
- **Andal (Kurumbapatti Zoo, Salem)**
- **Masini (Samayapuram temple, Trichy)**
- **Gomathy (Thiruvudaimaruthur temple, Kumbakonam)**

All these elephants are female elephants

Note: Books and reports mentioned in this document can be downloaded from our website

Case Study 1: Deivanai – Thiruparankundram Temple (Madurai)



Deivanai was purchased illegally from Assam at a young age.

Our report **“Illegal sale of elephants from NE India to South India”** highlights how elephants are illegally sold and shifted from North-East states to South Indian states.

She is in a mentally unstable state due to

- Abuse by the mahouts.
- Unable to understand the local language commands (Assam mahouts who captured her from the wild and tamed her used a different language of commands to tame her).
- Change of 3 mahouts
- Horrible living conditions.

She had assaulted the mahouts several times and had also caused loss of life of its mahout in 2020.

This elephant had expressed the pain it is undergoing in cruel captivity, by these attacks.

This mental instability was documented by the AWBI authorized committee’s inspection in Nov 2015

The details about the attacks and fatalities follow.

Deivanai – Thiruparankundram Temple - Madurai		
Incident	Date	Details of Behaviour, Attacks and Fatalities
Elephant illegally brought to the temple, at the age of 6, from Assam	Nov 2014	
AWBI and Madras high court authorized the inspection	Nov 2015	Mental instability documented in 2015
Attack-1	27-Mar-2018	Attacked two mahouts Ganapathi Subramaniyam and Kanaga Sundaram and they were seriously injured
Attack-2	27-July-2018	Attacked assistant mahout
Attack-3: Fatality	24-May-2020	Loss of life of assistant Mahout Kalidasan
Shifted to the rehabilitation centre	1-June-2020	Elephant shifted to the government elephant rehabilitation centre, Trichy
Attack-4	17-Jul-2020	It threw 24-year-old assistant mahout Charan at Trichy rehab centre. The mahout sustained serious spine injuries.
Sent back from rehabilitation centre to another temple	Feb-2021	Removed from the rehabilitation centre, sent back to Meenakshi temple (Madurai) and forced to perform rituals at the temple
Not allowed to participate in rejuvenation camp	Feb-2021	Deivanai was not sent to the Thekampatti govt. rejuvenation camp of 2021, for the temple elephants of Tamil Nadu.
Elephant sent back to the same abusive Thiruparankundram temple	6-Dec-2021	
Attack - 5	24-Dec-2021	Attacked a temple employee and he was hospitalized.

There was no response from FD and HRCE for the AWBI & Court committee's 2015 report, that pointed out mental instability.

After the initial attack if the elephant was shifted to the rehabilitation centre, where it can socialize with other elephants, then this mahout's fatality could have been avoided.

It is deeply shocking that the elephant was shifted from the Trichy Elephant Rehabilitation Centre to the Meenakshi Temple (Madurai), despite several instances that posed a risk to human life. Apart from that, the elephant was not sent to the temple elephants rejuvenation camp, which could have given some kind of solace and relief to the mentally insane animal.

Multiple petitions were sent by the foundation to the Madurai district collector and the forest officials to rehabilitate her, but no action (or) response was provided by the officials

Case Study 2: Andal – Small Zoo (Salem)

Andal, a 65-year-old elephant, initially belonged to Madurai Kallalagar temple, was shifted to the Mudumalai forest department in January 2009 for certain medical treatments.

Later, the elephant was moved to Salem Kurumbapatti Zoo in April 2009, based on the High Court petition filed by an advocate (the case was filed based on the instructions by an NGO near Mudumalai camp) that insisted on shifting the elephant out of the camp, as the petitioner suspected that the elephant had TB.

This elephant after being shifted from Mudumalai forest camp to Salem zoo, was forced to live an appalling life, chained 24 hours a day.

Due to stress caused by chained captivity, torture by mahout and worsening health conditions, Andal displayed an outburst of anger and frustration often.

The details about the attacks and fatalities are provided below

Elephant Andal – Salem Small Category Zoo		
Incident	Date	Details of Attacks and Fatalities
Fatality -1	2013	Loss of life of the forest watcher at the zoo
Fatality -2	3-December-2019	Loss of life the mahout at the zoo
Attack - 1	3-December-2019	On the same day, attacked the veterinarian at the zoo.

This elephant was denied an opportunity to participate in the annual elephants' rejuvenation camp, citing its age. This further worsened the elephant's mental sanity.

Andal's very act of defiance indicates the presence of raging annoyance in her, owing to the lack of natural freedom the animal is supposed to have. The above two fatalities could have been avoided if the elephant was given better living conditions and dealt with compassion

Only after two lives were lost the FD shifted her to the elephant camp in Anamalai.

Case Study 3: Gomathy – Thiruvidadaimarudhur Temple (Kumbakonam)



Gomathy, a temple elephant that belonged to Sri Mahalingaswamy temple, Thiruvidadaimarudhur, T.N. underwent unimaginable physical as well as psychological trauma each and every minute in captivity.

The observation made by the elephant scientist (Mr. Ajay Desai) who inspected the elephant indicated the appalling condition the elephant had suffered for about 6 decades (the same was recorded in the High Court order to shift Gomathy to the government rehabilitation centre)

“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 life imprisonment in solitary confinement”.

Such elephants exhibit severe psychological illnesses such as continuous head bobbing, body swaying etc.

The strong expression of stress took a human life away.

The details are provided below

Elephant Gomathy – Sri Mahalinga Swamy temple, Thiruvidadaimarudhur, Kumbakonam		
Incident	Date	Details of Attacks and Fatalities
Fatality	28-October-2012	Crushed a 55-year-old man (devotee) at Sri Mahalinga Swamy temple with its trunk.

Despite this fatalities, the elephant was kept in this condition for another 8 years (till 2020) and was moved to the rehabilitation centre only after the court order.

The elephant was also denied the opportunity to participate in the annual elephants' rejuvenation camp.

Case Study 4: Masini – Samayapuram Temple (Trichy)



Image of elephant Mariappan that was forced to stand like a statue for 7 long years, at the temple

An elephant named Mariappan was treated brutally and was **forced to stand like a statue, with three legs permanently chained for 24 hours a day**. The animal lived in this horrible condition at this temple, for 7 long years. **The animal was never taken for a walk in these 7 long years**. Finally, due to a complaint lodged by an animal lover, the elephant was shifted to the Anamalai forest camp.

When enquired with the mahout on why he illtreated the elephant, the shocking response from him was **“I don’t know how to handle an elephant”** This statement clearly shows that a random person was appointed as a mahout and was given a monthly salary for 7 years, for abusing this animal.

Despite the notorious past of this temple, another forest camp elephant Masini was given to this temple after the elephant Mariappan was sent back to the forest camp.

Masini – a 12-year-old female elephant was once living with its acquired family in a natural atmosphere in Mudumalai forest camp.

She was forcefully separated from her herd and was gifted to the temple by the then Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Ms Jayalalitha.

This elephant **unable to cope with the torture, abuse by the mahout, social isolation and artificial atmosphere in the temple had become mentally insane and had caused loss of life of the mahout**.

The details are provided below

Masini – Samayapuram Temple, Trichy		
Incident	Date	Details of Attacks and Fatalities
Fatalities	26-May-2018	Crushed the mahout inside the temple.

Furthermore, the elephant underwent barbaric abuse after the fatality

Without understanding the psychological and physical stress the elephant is undergoing, the elephant was brutally punished for this fatality by FD officials. As a punishment, this elephant was barbarically attacked by a group of 10 to 15 mahouts inside the temple. The injuries, blunt trauma and swellings on the elephant's body were deep, severe and were found all over the body. The mahouts also broke the tush (small tusks that female elephants have). Pus was oozing in multiple places on the body. The injury details were mentioned in the court order that sent this elephant back to the Mudumalai elephant camp (TN).

The animal was sent back to Mudumalai forest camp after 7 months. Even after 7 months it was unable to walk and had injuries all over the body. This shows the intensity and brutality of the attacks on this innocent animal, for no fault of it.



Masini in Mudumalai Camp in 2019

Multiple Injuries, blunt trauma and broken tush (small tusk of female elephants) caused by the attack of more than 10 mahouts, not healed even after 7 months of medical treatment.

Due to these, the elephant was malnourished, suffering in severe pain and was unable to walk even after 7 months of the attack on it

Recommendations to prevent human fatalities by captive elephants

The loss of the breadwinner of the family is a miserable condition and has a lifelong negative impact on the mahout's family. The suffering of these families cannot be expressed in words.

The case studies analysed in this report prove that the fatalities and loss of precious human lives could have been avoided if swift action was taken to improve the living conditions of the elephants, rehabilitate the elephants and dismiss abusive, alcoholic mahouts.

In multiple cases, it is noticed that the elephants were not allowed to participate in the TN government's annual rejuvenation camps. This further increased the stress level of the elephants.

Even though the elephant is accorded the highest protection (Schedule-I) under the "Wildlife Protection Act", it is shocking to know that the forest department and HRCE officials did not bother to take any action about the deplorable condition of these elephants, which were forced to suffer for several decades.

The district-level elephant welfare committees formed in TN were not doing their inspections in around 95% of the cases

Action is always initiated by the forest & HRCE authorities only after the court intervention. This approach is a highly condemnable negative approach. It is the primary duty of the forest officials to protect these Schedule-I elephants and they should not wait for a court order, to do their duty.

The case studies highlight that temples and zoos do not have any fundamental idea about the management of elephants and had brutally abused these poor voiceless creatures.

These elephants originally lived in dense rainforests with their natal herd. They were illegally sold to temples and private parties violating the laws.

(refer to the foundation's report "Illegal Sale of Elephants from North East India to South India")

A state-level initiative needs to be started immediately, to confiscate all these illegally procured elephants at temples and in private custody and rehabilitate them in a chain-free vast sanctuary (rehab facility)

If such an initiative is done, then it will bring a huge relief to the suffering elephants and will save several precious human lives that are lost due to negligence and lack of corrective actions.

More details about problems faced by captive elephants, rehabilitation methods along with photos can be found in our book "**Living Conditions of the Temple, Private Elephants. Solution to the problems**"

Acronyms

AWBI – Animal Welfare Board of India

FD – Forest Department

TN – Tamil Nadu

HRCE – Hindu Religious & Charitable Endowments

Elsa Foundation

**Analysis of the
root cause of human
fatalities caused by
captive elephants**