

A NEW EXPERIENCE IN REHABILITATION OF AN ORPHANED ELEPHANT CALF IN MUDUMALAI WILDLIFE SANCTUARY, TAMIL NADU

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First sighting of an orphaned calf

The mahout (chief elephant keeper) riding 'Bhama', the camp elephant in Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary reported to the staff around mid-February 2003 that a solitary elephant calf was spotted roaming around Compartments No. 9 and 10 of the sanctuary. It was surprising to find a calf all alone, unaccompanied by the mother or the herd in the wild. The three-year-old calf, apparently separated from the herd, was slightly weak from its looks and movement. It was decided to observe the animal in its natural home for some more time. The particular calf was sighted for nearly a month in the forest along the Kargudi-Thorapalli road. After this period, this calf was not to be seen around, which prompted the staff to conclude that the calf re-united with the herd.

Re-emergence of the orphan around the Bombax camp

The Department has been running an elephant camp in a place called Bombax close to the Moyar River, where about 10 of the captive elephants are interned. It is here, near the Bombax Watch Tower, the orphaned calf was again sighted on May 7th and 8th nearly after two months by some of the Bombax camp mahouts. It was quite

intriguing for the elephant staff to observe that on the 13th May 2003, at about 5.30 pm, the orphaned male calf chose to come close to Rathi, the 70 year old cow elephant which was tied to a tree near the bamboo grove along the river side (Fig. 1). Rathi owns 'track calving history' in Mudumalai camp by giving birth to a record number of calves in captivity between 1950 and 1987. Mother to 10 baby elephants and the 'aunt' elephant to many more calves, the innate caring nature of Rathi probably would have found expression in attracting the young elephant that was looking for some caress.

The male calf stood approximately at 1.5m with the tusks just jutting out of the trunk. Initially, it was planned to reunite the calf to its herd, as observations on wild elephant showed that calves continued to be mentored by the love and protection of their family for at least the first ten years of their life (Basappanavar, 1998). Driven to a distance of above 200-500m from the camp, the staff would find the calf returning to Rathi immediately, as a response to the call from Rathi. A certain degree of aggressiveness was also noticed in Rathi when the calf was being driven away from her. Having failed to drive away the calf, it was decided to monitor its movement and observe its kinship with Rathi and the other camp elephants for the next week.

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First week in the company of Rathi

During the first week, the calf maintained a distance of less than 20 m from cow. On its occasional straying, Rathi responded by pulling its trail chain aggressively and sometimes by making loud distress note. Sukumar (2003) noted that young calves remain in proximity to their mothers. Ambroseli (Kenya, Africa) elephants aged 0-8 years remained within 5 m of their mothers about 80% of the time. The calf shared the cut fodder given to Rathi besides natural grazing. Drinking and bathing by calf invariably happened along with Rathi. Besides the grazing, the camp elephants are put on concentrate feed twice a day. On the third day at the camp, the male calf was trying to feed on the cooked concentrate food that was falling out from the mouth of Rathi. This was expected, as in wild situation, a calf was seen putting its trunk into its mother's mouth while she was feeding to retrieve a portion of food (Sukumar, 1985). The staff began placing the cooked food mixture comprising of Ragi, Horsegram, salt and jaggery on a gunny bag spread close to Rathi, which was well received by the calf. This has set in a conditioned reflex in the calf, which would go near the gunny bag at the feeding time.

Observations on the contact of the calf with other elephant inmates of the camp revealed that the orphaned calf tried to communicate with the elephants that were taken towards the calf. The other adult female in the camp, Kamatchi showed 'no mothering relationship with the calf' while Bhama displayed such allomothering relationship only partially.

After a month at Bombax camp

After a month the Department was

contemplating the possibility of enkraaling (the practice of confining the elephants in a wooden enclosure like home) the young wild elephant, as that would make it possible to provide proper training. By this time, the calf was found roaming freely for grazing, even going up to a distance of about 300 m away from Rathi. Around the feeding time, the calf was seen reaching the feeding yard, standing besides the timber railing and consuming the concentrate feed kept spread on the gunnysack. During that week, the camp Veterinarian noticed that the calf was attempting to 'false-suckle' on the breast of Rathi inflicting some discomfort to her. This orphaned calf was probably looking for some successful suckling. This behaviour reinforced the earlier observations at Bandipur by Vijayakumar Nair, which suggested that the captive elephant calves allomothered more regularly from females that have weaned their own calves (Sukumar, 2003).

Around this period, the kraal was put up at about 50m above the feeding area. The calf was gradually trained to come close to or inside the kraal by enticing it with split sugarcane from close to the mouth of the kraal or by spreading *Ficus* and bamboo leaves on its floor, which the calf started feeding on with no suspicion.

After about sixty days in the camp

The calf would go for grazing in the forest area during daytime along with Rathi and Kamatchi. During this period, if the calf were driven away from these two cows, it would always rush back to Rathi. By now, the calf elephant had started receiving the 'concentrate feed balls' directly from the hands of its cavity with whom it was feeling comfortable (Fig. 2). At the bathing time in the riverbed, the cavity was still not able

Fig. 1



The Orphaned Calf Near Rathi On 14.05.03

Fig. 2



The Calf receiving the feed from the hands of veterinarian

Fig. 3



The Calf at Bathing after 2 months



Rathi reacting aggressively to the process of Kraaling

Fig. 5



The calf being Enkraaled on 26.09.03



Bomman obeying the commands

to be in direct contact with the calf for scrubbing and he could clean the calf's back only by sprinkling water (Fig. 3).

After about three months in the camp

During the first week of August 2003, a small trailing chain was tied around the calf's hind leg. Observations indicated that the calf got used to the trailing chain and was moving freely in the company of Rathi. During this period, the calf suffered a bout of diarrhoea, which was orally treated with 'gut acting antibiotics' through sugarcane. The calf's reaction to human was becoming 'less aggressive'.

Operation Enkraaling

Elephants in captivity undergo a full pledged training programme in order to learn and obey the commands of their mahouts and cavadies. They have to respond to well over 48 commands, associated with the normal activities of the animal like turning, lying down, raising the trunk, lifting the legs, kneeling etc. The day for enkraaling was scheduled for 26.09.03. Rathi was firmly tied to a tree and on her sides were kept two other trained elephants of the camp. With the help of two other kumkies (trained captive elephants), the calf was pushed to move towards the *kraal*. Visibly disturbed by the process of separation, Rathi showed some violent reaction towards kumkies by trumpeting, trying to pull and break the chain. However, the calf didn't show any resistance and meekly submitted to the kumkies, which were able to push the calf into the *kraal* effortlessly (Figs. 4 and 5).

Training in the Kraal

The calf was fed with the green fodder

and concentrate through the gaps in rails along with the commands from the cavady, which were obeyed by the calf. Water was filled in a drum kept closer to the wall of the *kraal*. The training lasted for about 26 days at the end of which the calf was taken out on 22.10.2003. The cavady opined that the calf responded to the various commands sincerely and the learning was rather fast.

Subsequent observations

The elephant calf had completed its 'operant learning' process even before the animal was put into the *kraal*. The animal reaching the feeding yard around the feeding time, reaching out for a sugarcane stick with its trunk raised towards the man holding it were clear expressions. Found to be fast in active learning, the calf learned to respond to 50% of the total verbal and foot commands within a month of its probation. Possessing a calm temperament, the calf showed complete obedience to its cavady.

In the history of Mudumalai Elephant Camp, considered as one of the finest elephant homes across the country, there are many instances of orphans below one year successfully reared in captivity. But with regard to separated calves over three years of age getting acquainted with a camp inmate voluntarily, leading ultimately to its capture and training was not recorded except probably one incident during April, 1975 when a 5-year old male orphaned elephant was captured and made part of the camp. As the elephant men from local Kurumba tribe consider that the calf elephant has been god sent, christened the elephant 'Bomman', in adoration of their deity. After about six months of its first visit to the Bombax camp, in May 2003, Bomman has emerged out to be the finest and playful

calf elephant in the sanctuary (Fig. 6).

With a yearlong living experience in the camp environment, the 4-year-old Bomman measured 157 cm in height and weighed 845 kg in April 2004. In addition to the regular grazing, he has been put on a daily ration schedule fixed by the Forest

Veterinary Officer. With the advanced learning process on, Bomman has already become an elephant poojari, performing the pooja before the camp's Vinayaka shrine at the appointed time daily. Bomman is naturally a star attraction for the hundreds of tourists thronging the elephant camp at Mudumalai.

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SUMMARY

This paper describes the process of rehabilitation of a 3-year-old orphaned male elephant calf in Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary, which followed an unusual course. The oldest cow elephant of the camp - 'Rathi' became its foster mother and nurtured a strong allmothering bond and maternal kinship with the calf. During the initial 4 months, the calf moved around the camp, showing normal behaviour of locomotion, feeding and bathing. It was then enkraaled for 3 weeks for training, during which it picked up the operant and effective learning more quickly. Christened 'Bomman', it turned out into a fine and playful animal within a year.

मुडुमलै वन्यप्राणि अभयारण्य, तमिलनाडु में अनाथ रह गए हस्ति शावक के पुनर्वासन का एक नया अनुभव
टी. शेखर व एन. कलैवनन्

सारांश

इस अभिपत्र में एक तीन वर्षीय अनाथ रह गए नर हस्ति शावक के पुनर्वासन प्रक्रिया का वर्णन दिया गया है जो असामान्य जीवन प्रणाली पर चलने लगा था। शिविर की सबसे वृद्ध हथिनी, रति, से प्रारम्भिक जानपहचान होने से ही, इस पालक माता का इस बच्चे के साथ गहरा सर्वमातामयी सम्बन्ध और मातृत्व स्नेह हो गया था। बच्चे को शिविर के वातावरण में अधिकांश समय रति और अन्य पशुनिवासियों के साथ आरम्भिक चार महीनों तक मुक्त रूपेण विचरण करने दिया गया जिस अवधि में यह हस्ति-शावक चलने-फिरने, खाने-पीने, नहाने का सामान्य व्यवहार प्रदर्शित करता रहा। इस हस्ति-शावक को तीन सप्ताहों तक एक अस्थायी कराल में इसे समुचित प्रशिक्षण देने के लिए रख दिया गया। शावक का नाम बोम्मन रखा गया और वह एक वर्ष भी कम समय में मुडुमलै के हस्ति शिविर का सुन्दर और क्रीड़ाप्रिय पशु बन गया।

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