Becoming Elephant

The Relational Personalities of Arikomban, Kalloor Komban and Soorya in South India

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Abstract: This paper presents the stories of three Asian elephants—Arikomban, Kalloor Komban, and Soorya—who live in a landscape of conflict, coexistence, survival, and captivity in the Western Ghats of South India. The stories of the three elephants give insights into what it means to "become" an elephant in different anthropogenic settings: in a mosaic forest landscape, in captivity at the elephant camp, and as a trained *kumki* (working) elephant who serves the forest department fighting against his conspecifics and mitigating so-called Human-Elephant Conflict (HEC). Our paper engages with what we call "relational personalities", the individual and personal characteristics of elephants acquired throughout their life in contact and in close relationship to people. The article aims to acknowledge the personal histories of elephants in interaction with people and the knowledge and skills they have developed to survive in a mosaic forest landscape. Elephants have changed as individuals and as a species in the Anthropocene, and they endure hardships and violence when living close to people. Living near people and in human lifeworlds as well as among other elephants in a dynamic environment has shaped their habits, ways of being, and emotions—what they love, desire, dislike, fear, feel angry or joyful about. Arikomban, Kalloor Komban, and Soorya teach us that in order to better understand contemporary elephants, and facilitate their survival in non-captive settings, we need to recognize them as individuals with personalities situated in spatial and temporal history, politics, and trauma. Although shaped by interactions with people, elephants actively create their lifeworlds and respond to their environments and human contact in a variety of ways.

Keywords: *becoming elephant, relational personalities, animal biographies, captivity, compassion*

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His unstoppable desire to eat rice brought fame to Arikomban, the "Rice Tusker" (*ari*, rice; *komban*, tusker in Malayalam), across South India. Arikomban received his name from the people who lived alongside him on the outskirts of the fragmented Chinnakannal forest, situated in the hilly district of Idukki in Kerala. Arikomban showed an unusually strong preference for human food. Rather than being a so-called "crop-raider," feeding on farmers' rice fields, his desire for *ari*, his favourite food, drew Arikomban close to people's houses. During his nightly expeditions, Arikomban would reach through open windows with his trunk, break down the walls of mud houses, and demolish the doors of grocery shops to steal rice as well as vegetables, fruit, and other food items. Some people we spoke to speculated that Arikomban developed his strong taste for human food from a young age by consuming the rice used for brewing country liquor in the villages on the edge of the forest where he and other elephants lived. Some observers speculated that, like other elephants of his time, he might have developed an addiction to the taste and effects of alcohol.[1] Arikomban learned to break into the rice-brewing sheds to access the fermented rice and wheat and he kept no distance, continuing with the practice of seeking out people's houses.

Arikomban's desire for human food and the skills he developed to get it attracted attention from the local and national public, making him a celebrity all over South India. Stories about Arikomban's break-ins and raids contributed to heated debates over the increasing "human-wildlife conflict" in the state of Kerala, some of which led to accusations of human deaths on his name, even if the forest department could not provide any evidence for those claims. As narratives about Arikomban circulated, people's opinions on the elephant were divided. However, only a small portion of Arikomban's accusers had actually met the elephant. In their protest against Arikomban, they organized into a faction of "anti-wildlife groups," working under the umbrella of the Kerala Independent Farmers Association (KIFA).[2] Members of KIFA demanded

1 See also Barua, "Volatile ecologies".

2 For more information on KIFA, see https://kifa.co.in/why-we-exist/.

the removal of Arikomban from Chinnakanal, the small forest patch between the catchment of Chinnakanal Dam, the mountains, and human settlements. As they received wide support from both print and visual media houses in Kerala, the political parties and government were forced to respond. This led to Arikomban's unfortunate capture and relocation, traumatic events with severe consequences for his personal and social life.

Arikomban became a landmark case in the history of Kerala's forest governance and legal systems. When the forest department, responsible for managing the state's forest reserves and wildlife sanctuaries, announced its plan to capture Arikomban and place him in one of its elephant camps, legal disputes around wildlife issues proliferated. Anti-wildlife protesters in the KIFA camp filed a case before the Kerala High Court, claiming that Arikomban had killed seven people in Idukki. The forest department, however, stated that no one had actually seen the killings and that the evidence for the claim was unclear. At the same time, many people across Kerala defended Arikomban. Many went to court to protect Arikomban's right to continue to live where he was. Animal rights activists and environmental groups in Kerala, such as People for Animals, the Elephant Welfare Forum, and the Walking Eye Foundation for Animal Advocacy joined with the Muthuvan Adivasi[3] community of Chinnakanal at court to defend Arikomban. At the same time, members of the public, fascinated by elephants, formed fan clubs and citizen forums on social media sites like WhatsApp and Facebook to support Arikomban and to save him from capture. Many of these forums, organized by city dwellers, presented a humanized image of Arikomban, imagining him with an elephant wife and children and celebrating him as a hero. Buses and restaurants were named after Arikomban and pictures of him were affixed to buses, restaurants, and tea stalls along the national highway that cut across Kerala from Trivandrum to Kasargod. Schools erected statues of him in children's parks. While some people admired the elephant for his fearlessness and bravery, others participated in huge anti-Arikomban protests,

3 The term "Adivasi" means original (*ādi*) inhabitant (*vāsī*) in Hindi and it refers to the Indigenous groups of India, also still sometimes called "tribals".

portraying him as aggressive and dangerous and calling for his removal from his home territory.

Intervention by the court caused the forest department to abandon its plan to capture Arikomban. Instead, they chose to move him to a training camp and raise him as a *kumki*[4] elephant—a trained captive elephant. When the forest department finally captured and relocated the elephant to the Parambikulam, a tiger reserve over 280 km from his home, the media coverage was intense. Arikomban's fame rose from local to national and international levels. Animal rights activists questioned the violence and effectiveness of capture and captivity methods, while others celebrated the government's "heroic" removal of the "problematic animal" from the landscape. Popular media accounts covering Arikomban's story exposed people's diverse attitudes and emotions towards elephants and wildlife more generally, yet they provided few if any insights into the complex character and lifeworlds of the animals. At the same time, Arikomban's story points towards the role of place, time, and politics in the shaping of elephant life.

By engaging with Arikomban and the other two elephants living in the Western Ghats of South India, Kalloor Komban and Soorya, this paper argues that in order to better understand the lifeworlds of contemporary elephants we need to recognize them as situated individuals who actively create their lifeworlds and respond to their environments and human contact in a variety of ways. Through the biographies of these three elephants, we aim to show that elephants are complex, historically situated, and dynamic relational beings who are not static, but who instead become who they are through interactions with their environments, with the members of their own species and other animals, and with people and human infrastructures. As Donna Haraway reminds us, human and animal beings are enmeshed in practices of "becoming with".[5] Such an understanding

4 *Kumki*, derived from the Persian کمک (*kumak*), meaning help, aid, or assistance, refers to a trained elephant living in human captivity. In precolonial and British times, *kumki* were used for forestry. Today, the forest department uses them for specialized tasks such as capturing wild elephants, rescuing injured or trapped elephants, and managing human wildlife conflict.

5 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 23.

of elephants as co-becoming with humans and other species in particular places and times puts an emphasis on mutuality and accommodation. As philosopher Thom van Dooren notes, elephants, like all species, are "adaptive, emerging, and evolving"[6] animals. Elephants are born with a set of cognitive abilities and characteristics. Yet, throughout their lifetimes, elephants continuously learn and respond to new situations, thereby developing unique personalities, habits, and traits. We argue that the relational life histories and characteristics of individual elephants are essential to understanding these animals and to gaining insights into how they have changed as a species and as individuals in response to rapid environmental changes and encounters with a diversity of human practices.

At the same time, by engaging the stories of these three elephants, we aim to show that recognizing the unique personalities of individual elephants and how they enter into relationships is important for identifying a wider range of reasons for and situations in which elephants come into contact and conflict with people. Attending the personal, contextualized stories of individual elephants can thus contribute to a better understanding of human and elephant coexistence and offer new, more creative ways to live alongside them in human-dominated landscapes. Our paper thus criticizes the current strategy of the government of identifying and removing so-called "problematic individuals" without analysing the history of each personality and recognizing that conflicts occur in politically and emotionally charged situations. We also argue that the violence involved in the capturing and relocation process of so-called problematic bulls is understudied and silenced in current conservation practices. Recognizing, like many people in South India, that elephants are unique individuals with individual histories, characteristics, ways of life, and their own agency requires going beyond the consideration of elephants as merely a species. If we are to find more ethical practices of coexistence, the engagement with individual elephant personalities and their complex relational and emotional lives is essential.

6 Van Dooren, *Flightways,* 8.

All three elephant personalities presented in this paper were born and live in the Western Ghats of Kerala, one of the oldest mountain ranges and a biodiverse "natural heritage" home to the world's largest surviving population of 26,000–28,000 free-ranging Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*).[7] Two of them, Kalloor Komban and Soorya, live in two of India's largest remaining elephant camps, legacies of colonial times that were once used for elephant capture and timber work: Theppakadu, in Tamil Nadu, and Muthanga, in Kerala. First, we present Arikomban. During the forest department's violent capture operation, he encountered two trained kumki elephants, Kalloor Komban and Soorya. Both were members of Kerala's Rapid Response Team under the Kerala Forest Department. Together with veterinarians, forest officials, and mahouts, they took part in the operation to capture Arikomban. Kalloor Komban was once what is known as a "wild," or rather, free-ranging elephant, known as a so-called "crop-raider". After his capture by the forest department, he was trained as a kumki and is now used by the forest department to mitigate human elephant conflicts at various locations in the Western Ghats. Thus, Kalloor Komban experienced a radical and traumatic change, leaving behind one life and beginning another, a "second life" in captivity. Soorya, on the other hand, never experienced a free-ranging life, having lived all his life in captivity in Muthanga. What these three elephants share is that they all have been in close contact with people, and these human encounters have shaped their biographies and personalities. All three of them have experienced the trauma of human violence: they were forced to submit to human will, control, and labour. Yet they each have a life of their own and their own unique way of responding to living alongside people.

Elephant biologists have described elephants' complex social and cultural lives among their conspecifics; their intelligence and cognitive and emotional capacities; and their abilities to feel empathy, use tools, transfer knowledge across generations, learn, teach others, and adjust to new situations.[8] Scientists agree that elephants, like

7 Baskaran et al., "Current Status".

8 Byrne, Bates, and Moss, "Elephant Cognition"; Bates et al., "Knowledge Transmission"; Plotnik and Jacobson, "A 'Thinking Animal'"; Srinivasaiah et al., "Usual Populations".

other animals, exhibit "behavioural variations among individuals of the same species, reflective of what we would refer to in humans as 'personality'".[9] However, detailed studies of the behavioural and cultural aspects of elephants' lives — ethnographies (what anthropologists call "thick descriptions"[10] or ethographies[11] — thick behavioural descriptions of elephant lives — are largely missing, with a few works on human-elephant relationships emerging out of more-than-human anthropology[12] or what Piers Locke has called "ethno-elephantology"[13] as well as out of more-than-human geography and political ecology.[14] Few accounts exist of how elephants become who they are, how they enter relationships, and how they change their patterns and ways of life in close interaction with people. Furthermore, in contemporary Indian wildlife biology and conservation debates about so-called human-elephant conflict management, elephants by and large are treated on a species or population level; their personalities, life histories, individual characteristics, and learning abilities are overlooked. Rigorous and thorough studies of the behavioural traits that elephants have developed in response to living in anthropogenic environments, be it in captivity or in free-ranging populations, are lacking. We argue that an integration of this fragmented knowledge is necessary to facilitate coexistence and survival with elephants.

One reason for the scholarly inattentiveness to elephant personalities is that in order to truly know the personalities of elephants and their life stories, people must spend a lot of time with them, consistently being attentive to them and to how they lead their lives. Long-term studies of the personalities of Asian elephants have been conducted in a captive zoo setting.[15] Those who work with free-ranging elephants such as scientists, forest officials, and others involved in conservation, understand that elephants are individuals with unique personalities

9 Rutherford et al., "Personality," 1.

10 Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

11 Lestel, "Ethology and Ethnology".

12 Hathaway, "Wild Elephants"; Keil, *The Presence of Elephants*; Lainé, *Living and Working*; Münster, "Working for the Forest".

13 Locke, "Explorations in Ethnoelephantology".

14 Barua, "Bio-Geo-Graphy"; Lorimer, "Elephants as Companion Species".

15 Rutherford et al., "Personality".

and traits, and that humans can know them as such if they are dedicated and have sufficient time and funding. Dedicated scientists can learn a considerable amount about elephants from those who live alongside them: the forest watchers, the mahouts, local forest officials, and farmers on the forest fringes. Our work shows that the observations and experiences of such people matter and amount to more than mere "anecdotes" that are not taken seriously and remain unpublished. We argue that these stories offer necessary insight into the ways in which elephants live and survive in contemporary Anthropocene settings, and that they complement the methods and epistemologies of biology, wildlife, and conservation sciences.

Our article is in keeping with the South Indian tradition of identifying elephant personalities that impact people's daily lives and that spark their interest, affection, and wariness. Individual elephants, both captive and free ranging, have been part of South Indian culture and daily life. People's ability to know and identify individual elephants depends on proximity, opportunity, curiosity, and necessity. For example, farmers living on the forest fringes observe individual elephants while watching their crops and guarding their fields. Behavioural ecologists and wildlife biologists identify and follow individual elephants as part of their research. Various people who live near forests (forest workers, department officials, members of Adivasi communities) observe free-ranging elephants for various reasons—out of interest, to avoid harm, or to develop affectionate relationships with them. In our conversations, they often shared a sense of wonder about these animals and their social lives. They observed the elephants' movements and seasonal migration routes, their diurnal and nocturnal rhythms, their feeding patterns, reproductive practices, and ways of resistance.

In this article, we focus on elephants who experience capture and captivity as part of South India's conservation regime. All three characters are male elephants, as most elephants identified as "conflict individuals" are bulls, and as they happened to be captured and trained as kumkis to be used in further capture operations. It is very rare to use female elephants in capture operations. The elephant cows

present in the camps, like Sundari in Muthanga, are usually brought in as abandoned calves. It is impossible to imagine what an elephant might feel, sense, think and need. As Thomas Nagel reminds us in his classic essay "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?", when meeting nonhuman animals, we are "restricted to the resources of [our] own mind[s], and those resources are inadequate to the task".[16] To come closer to noticing and understanding the unique personalities of the three elephant protagonists of our paper, we have drawn on our own experiences with elephants over many years. At the same time, we have interacted with people who have long-standing connections to them: mahouts, forest watchers, farmers, wildlife veterinarians, biologists, officials working with elephants directly, and members of the so called Rapid Response Team (RRT) which was set up by the forest department to chase, tranquillize, relocate, and radio-collar individual elephants who have come into conflict with people. Over decades, we have visited forest villages in all three states of the Western Ghats — Kerala, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu — and conversed about elephants and their unique personalities. To complement our conversations and observations, we have participated in the virtual space of social media (Facebook, WhatsApp groups, YouTube videos) and watched visual media (news clips). Videos of elephants circulate on social media, recorded by people with mobile phones or cameras or taken inadvertently by the ubiquitous CCTV cameras that monitor people's movements and activities, ostensibly to prevent theft and unwanted human encroachments into private spaces. The video content we watched ranged from elephants engaging in crop-raiding, road-crossing, charging, and chasing people, to the forest department's capture operations, which included identifying and locating the "problematic individuals", shooting tranquillizer darts, and transferring sedated elephants to presumed safe locations with the help of trained kumki elephants. Some of these videos, many of them recorded by Malayalam local television news reporters, originated as live telecasts of a truck with the semi-sedated animal travelling kilometres to its destination. These violent "capturing operations," accompanied by dramatic music, circulated via television news and YouTube channels

16 Nagel, "What It Is Like," 436.

for the purpose of entertainment. After watching the visual material, we discussed it with people who demanded the removal of the elephants from their habitats and who participated in their capture and transfer as well as with the mahouts, the elephant trainers who have longstanding relationships with individual elephants.

The personal histories of all three elephants we studied are marked by relationships with people. They show that love, closeness, friendships, violence, anger, aggression, trauma, and captivity are all part of the everyday life of elephants in South India, shaping the elephants' personalities. They also show that elephants respond to situations differently, and are in fact active agents in creating their lifeworlds and the worlds around them. Their biographies and thus their derived personalities are outcomes of individual suffering and pain that they go through to live with humans. In this paper, we deliberately highlight that the theme of trauma runs through the three biographies. Derived from the Greek τραῦμα, "trauma" means "wound" or "injury". We intentionally use the term trauma, which usually refers to human conditions, to draw attention to violence, pain, and fear as factors and sculptors of the lives of contemporary free-ranging and captive elephants. Elephant biologists and psychologists have borrowed the term trauma from psychology because severe physical or emotional shock and pain has "lasting psychophysiological effects on [the] brain and behaviour" of elephants,[17] just as it does for humans. Trauma has shaped the lives of all three elephants portrayed in this paper, yet their responses are individual and unique.

Arikomban, Kalloor Komban, and Soorya each have different personalities and personal histories, but they also have some shared experiences. Arikomban and Kalloor Komban experienced the violence of capture and relocation, events that radically altered their lives and affected their personalities. Capturing so-called "rogue"[18] or "prob-

17 Bradshaw et al., "Elephant Breakdown," 807. See also Bradshaw, *Elephants on the Edge*.

18 The Indian forest department historically used the name "rogue elephant" to describe solitary, unpredictable, and dangerous elephants, the majority of whom were bulls. "Rogue bulls" was also a term used by forest officers. In current conservation debates and literature the term has been criticized as ignoring the reasons behind the aggressiveness of an animal.

lematic" elephants and relocating them or holding them in elephant camps has become a common, (though controversial) practice of the forest department for "managing" conflict between elephants and people. Most of the kumki elephants were once free-ranging elephants. This means that most of the inhabitants of an elephant camp have undergone the violence of capture and are now leading what we call a "second life" in captivity. Choosing these three elephants as main protagonists, our aim is to highlight the complexities of becoming elephants in the South Indian Anthropocene. Here, economic interests, land use priorities, and politics of conservation and governance play vital roles in shaping elephant lives, and each elephant responds to such environments in their unique individual ways.

Arikomban and Desire

Arikomban developed his desire for human food and the strategies and skills to obtain it while living in close contact with people. Born in Chinnakanal, he spent forty years as part of a small elephant population in an enclosed patch of forest bounded by steep mountains on one side and by plantations on the other. Given these restrictions on the herd's movement, Arikomban inevitably encountered humans from an early age. He became the elephant he is in an anthropogenic environment in which most of the vegetative growth was cultivated by and for people. In his daily life, Arikomban needed to trespass on plantations of tea, bananas, on vegetable gardens, noisy villages, busy roads with substantial tourist traffic, the backwaters of dams disconnected from old pathways, and on infrastructures such as houses, townships, and tourist accommodations. He breached fences and walls meant to keep elephants out. He hid from people in patches of forest and fed on the bark, bamboo, and other grasses and plants that elephants have traditionally eaten in this landscape. To survive, Arikomban needed to develop new behaviours and rhythms of diurnal and nocturnal movement to evade plantation owners, farmers, forest department officials, and heavy highway traffic. Life alongside people also shaped his food preferences, changed his body's metabolism, and stimulated his craving

for human food. Some say that he became addicted to human foods, to alcohol, sugar, salt, and other tastes uncommon to the forests.

Elephants other than Arikomban have also developed a taste for crops cultivated by people for their own consumption and profit, among them mango, jackfruit, arecanut, coconut, and even coffee beans. Farmers and forest watchers vividly recount stories of elephants with peculiar food cravings. One farmer told us about an elephant tusker who frequently visited his coffee farm but only when the jackfruits, which he was very fond of, were ripe. This tusker walked carefully, without breaking the branches of the coffee plants or crushing any bananas, going straight to the jackfruit tree; after eating, the elephant retreated without leaving a trace. A woman from an Adivasi community in Chekadi described an elephant who came regularly to her home to eat the fruit of a nearby mango tree. The elephant appears every year at the same time and only leaves after all the fruit is gone. Maniyan, an elephant known to be particularly friendly to people living near Irulam, a village near the forest boundaries in Wayanad, Kerala, was fond of any food people give him. Maniyan remained near the township for food throughout most of the year, retreating to the forest alone only when he entered his annual musth.[19] Yet, people from all sections of the society who had met Arikomban—including shopkeepers, settler-farmers, members of Indigenous Adivasi communities, forest watchers, and forest officers—expressed their conviction that Arikomban's habit of eating rice and breaking houses was extraordinary. Thus, they called him Arikomban, the rice tusker.

It is not unusual for South Asian free-ranging elephants to receive names according to their characteristics, habits, or food preferences. Villagers, farmers, forest officials, and others living in daily contact with elephants closely observe them and differentiate between individual elephants as they enter fields, come near their houses, and move through their shared landscape. Sharing space with potentially dangerous animals means being attentive to their diverse ways of being, both out of curiosity and out of necessity, as one needed to

19 A word derived from the Persian مست (*mast*) meaning drunk or intoxicated.

protect crops or to avoid being harmed by them in unanticipated encounters. Often, the names given to elephants reflect their unique body features, their habits and food preferences. For example, another tusker living in Chinnakanal along with Arikomban was named Chakkakomban, denoting his desire for *chakka* — jack fruit. Another elephant was called Chillikomban, which referred to his tusk, which was shaped like *chiilli* — the small, thin branch of a tree. Another elephant living in the district of Wayanad in Kerala was simply called Valmuriyan ("without tail"), since he lacked one. Similarly, captive elephants living in elephant camps or temples all have names, such as the famous temple elephants Guruvayur Kesavan, Thechikode Ramachanadran, and Thiruvanbadi Sivasundar. Free-ranging elephants are also sometimes given human names, just like pets. Kannan and Maniyan, for example, are known to the people in the villages of Wayanad that they frequent. Sometimes, elephants also receive the names of popular film characters, such as Padayappa, a character in a Malayalam blockbuster.

Living in landscapes that people have designed to meet their own desires, needs, and greed, contemporary elephants adjust their diets and preferences to what is available. Like Arikomban, most of South India's elephants now forage outside the so-called forests and protected areas, co-developing what we call "anthropogenic desires" due to prolonged exposure to people. Elephants now feed on diverse foods as they move in and out of patches of forest: sometimes they eat traditional forest food like bamboo or tree bark, sometimes they eat plantation crops, food that people feed them, or food waste that they find near temples, roadsides, tourist centres, or food stands. Some say that elephants have even become addicted to the salt and sugar they find in potato chips packets and ice cream discarded on the edges of roads used by tourists and other travellers. The desires the elephants develop, however, clearly differ from animal to animal despite sharing the same anthropogenic habitat. Their desires affect their food preferences, their movements, their daily rhythms, and the ways in which they act towards people, as their behaviours are shaped by the locations of their favourite foods.

Arikomban adjusted his daily routine to suit his food preferences. Asian elephants are traditionally diurnal: they search for food during the day and sleep at night. However, Arikomban learned when people were away from the sites he visited for feeding. The people who knew him observed that he waited until dark to move toward the townships and shops in search of rice. He came to the houses during the day as that is when most of the villagers are at work, they told us. When he encountered people or managed to break buildings in his search for rice, he got into trouble. Such instances are often generalized as "human–elephant conflict" in conservation debates. However, by focusing on what the elephants actually seek — what they desire — when they enter spaces now dominated by humans, one can see that referring to these encounters as "conflict" is misleading. Elephants encounter people via a diversity of relationships. Rather than being killer elephants — "kolayali aana" — elephants who seek to harm people, as they are often portrayed in newspaper articles or popular media, elephants move into fields for diverse reasons. For example, they might be attracted to calorie-rich food that provides fast energy, or they might be used to human food, as was the case with Arikomban, whose love of rice motivated him to leave the forest and approach human settlements. Or, they may come into conflict with humans due to a trauma response, or in an effort to avoid bright lights or loud sounds on their way. There may also be other reasons we don't yet understand, but it is prudent to ask what motivates an elephant in order to understand their behaviour.

Ethnographers of elephants and their collaborators working in other geographical contexts have noted that, through their desires, elephants become "active agents" in anthropogenic landscapes.[20] Elephants create their own worlds and have their own behavioural logic, as opposed to simply being driven by instinct and established patterns of behaviour. As anthropologist Michael Hathaway learned from farmers of China's Yunnan Province, the elephants' curiosity and "desire" motivates them to learn about new technologies, such

20 Hathaway, "Wild Elephants"; cf. Keil, *The Presence of Elephants*; Lainé, *Living and Working*.

as electric fences, and to experiment with new foods, and learn new ways to avoid infrastructures such as highways. More-than-human geographer Maan Barua tells us that elephants in Sundarpur, India's state of Assam, break into village distilleries to become intoxicated. Barua speculates that this desire might well be a new feature of "elephant culture" that has emerged in response to violent interactions with humans and the resulting trauma that these elephants have experienced.[21] Animal psychologist Gay A. Bradshaw has observed that for African elephants experiencing conflict, being injured, or observing the killing of their conspecifics can cause depression, asocial behaviour, or what Bradshaw calls "hyper aggression".[22]

Evolving animal desires are temporally and spatially situated in history. Arikomban's growing interest in rice co-evolved alongside the region's recent socioeconomic transformation. After 2000, the area became a new hub of tourism development. Many new resorts were built, increasing human activity, resulting in tourism activities encroaching on the forested region. In 2003, the state government resettled 559 landless Adivasi families to this fragmented forest region, right into the path of frequent elephant movement. While the members of the newly settled Adivasi families disagreed with being resettled in the location, they did not have any other option. Many families could not stay in Chinnakanal permanently because of the elephant problem. The increase in tourism on the fringes and in forest enclosures also disrupted the life of Muthuvans, the resident Adivasi community in the area. The elephants adapted their lives to the drastic demographic and economic changes in the region by adjusting their likes and dislikes, including eating habits. Community members belonging to the Muthuvans told us that it was the increase in tourism and land interest that made the new landowners, who are part of organizations such as KIFA, fire up the conflict and portray Arikomban as a "killer elephant". It was members of the Muthuvans and other Adivasi families that led the protest at Chinnakanal against the government, asking to bring Arikomban back after his capture and relocation.

21 Barua, "Volatile Ecologies".

22 Bradshaw et al., "Elephant Breakdown". See also Bradshaw, *Elephants on the Edge.*

One of our key sources for Arikomban and his behaviour was Santhosh, an environmentalist and animal rights advocate who filed the case for Arikomban in Kerala's high court. Santhosh and many others living in the region told us that Arikomban's interest in rice was caused by his exposure to the rice and wheat used in fermenting country liquor. Arikomban and other tuskers started breaking into the illegal breweries built in areas elephants traditionally traversed and ate the rice and wheat. The elephants in this region developed this habit over the years that the new settlements and tourism appeared. The locals, activists, and forest department officials told us that attraction to fermented plants was common to many elephants here. But some elephants, like Arikomban, were bolder and more passionate in their pursuit of the fermented grains and would take greater risks to obtain them. People described Arikomban as adamant in his passions. Advocate Santhosh told us that the members of the enclosed elephant population in this area were born there and usually lived close to people. Members of the Muthuvans interact closely with the elephants in their daily lives and even feed them their favourite foods. Arikomban was unique in his habit of searching for food in people's kitchens. If he wanted something from the kitchen, he would break in. Santhosh told us that Arikomban was easily satisfied, even with just an onion, but that he would always take something. The people of Chinnakanal distinguished Arikomban from other animals as he sought out human closeness and human food almost exclusively. However, they didn't share stories of his aggressiveness towards people, apart from breaking into shops and houses.

In describing Arikomban's behaviour, Santhosh recalled a personal experience. Santhosh used to be a frequent visitor to Chinnakanal, where he often joined his friends from resident Adivasi communities on his expeditions to the forest. Sometimes, he carried pineapples for the elephants. Having a keen sense of smell, the elephants were drawn by the pineapple scent. One day, when Arikomban didn't receive a pineapple, he appeared in front of Santhosh's motorbike, blocking his route home. Santhosh and his local guide sat on a rock near the vehicle and started a fire to prevent Arikomban from

coming near. But Arikomban stood his ground. Finally, after eight hours, Santhosh called a friend to bring a few pineapples from the nearby market to feed Arikomban. His desire satisfied, the elephant moved off the road, giving way to Santhosh and his companions.

In 2015, the Kerala forest department declared Arikomban a "dangerous bull" in response to increased complaints that he was breaking into houses and shops in search of rice. Higher forest officials decided that he should be tranquilized, captured, and relocated. According to the forest department's estimate, Arikomban had broken into seventy-five buildings since 2005. One year, he vandalized a ration shop in the Panniyaar estate nine times. In 2017, the department tried to capture him with the aid of an experienced kumki elephant named Anamalay Karim, however their efforts failed. Although shot with a tranquilizer dart, Arikomban escaped into the forest. He stayed away from Chinnakanal for a while but eventually resumed raiding houses and shops for rice. By now he drew more attention from locals and animal activists who expressed empathy and love for the elephant, fed him, and called for learning to cope with behaviour over his removal. Yet many others, mainly the anti-wildlife protest groups who were part of KIFA, initiated campaigns against him, putting out media stories about sightings and encounters with Arikomban to gain public support.

KIFA was founded by the largeholder farmers of Kerala, but it organizes all kinds of farmers and entrepreneurs with the objective of fighting conservation laws that restrict land rights and defending against or killing wild animals that emerge from protected areas. KIFA argues that the increase in wild animal attacks was the result of the growing number of wild animals caused by the scientific wildlife management approaches rooted in age-old conservation legislation. The organization argues for culling the animals that leave areas protected by the forest department and maintains the right to kill animals that it considered "problematic" (due to them feeding on crops or posing a threat to people or domesticated animals). KIFA's core demand was an amendment to the Indian Wildlife Protection Act (1972), which strictly forbids the killing of elephants and other wildlife, to

empower the state department, district-level officers, and farmers to kill animals that leave the confines of India's protected areas, entered human habitats, and become dangerous. In 2020, KIFA, having grown to more than forty thousand members in Kerala alone, initiated a campaign against Arikomban. Singling him out as a "problematic individual" and identifying him as a "rogue bull" without evidence was a way to draw public attention to the issue and pressure the state to remove him and establish elephant capture as an acceptable practice of elephant management and "conflict mitigation".

The forest department responded to the pressure built up by KIFA and the media by giving into the people's demands and branding Arikomban as a trouble maker, capturing and relocating him. By singling out and removing Arikomban, the department failed to address the actual structural problem of human-wildlife conflicts or the fact that there might have been more elephants who had joined Arikomban in the raids. In Chinnakannal, locals resisted his capture, claiming that while Arikomban was a particularly rice-attached elephant, he was otherwise not aggressive. Their voices, however, remained largely unheard by officials, politicians, and the media.

In Arikomban's case, being identified as an elephant who had become "too human" in his desires meant being subjected to human-inflicted violence and suffering. The forest department's procedure for elephant capture, which we witnessed in many videos shared via WhatsApp, was dangerous, complex, and often brutal. It involved marking the elephants, studying their movements, spotting a good time and place to shoot them with a tranquillizer dart, waiting until the animal was unconscious, and then moving them into a truck for transport. Dr Rathish, a veterinarian from Kerala Veterinary University, told us that the anaesthesia should be delivered very carefully. In an interview, he shared his concern about sedating a free ranging elephant: "It is a physiologically and psychologically stressful and traumatic process for the animal. It also requires the estimation of the animal's size, weight and health condition from a distance, and often one dose is not sufficient to sedate the animal. In addition, you need to estimate the state of the

animal's health, and the stress level of the animal in order to get the dosage right." Dr Rathish outlined the violence involved in the sedation process:

> After the elephant has been sedated, the sleeping animal is forced to stand up by kumki elephants who are directed by mahouts. Usually, the kumkis are directed to push the elephant head-first into the truck that transports the animal. If the drowsy half-sedated animal sinks or falls down while they are trying to move it, the mahouts pour water and place wet cloths on its back to wake it up. Then, the kumkis push it from behind toward the truck, which, depending on the circumstances, could be from some distance away. Sometimes, the elephant will not move in the direction of the truck. Then, the kumkis are guided by the mahouts to push the immobilized animal from the front and side. Often, the elephant hesitates to enter the truck and turns 180 degrees, so it is facing away from the vehicle. Then, when the kumkis try to move it, they must push against its forehead to push the sedated animal into the truck moving backwards. In this process, the kumki elephants often wound and bleed the sedated animal.

Many videos of capture operations feature elephants with bleeding tusks.

We can only speculate how Arikomban's life changed after his capture and relocation or learn second-hand from accounts of people who claim to have seen him. At present, we do not know where Arikomban is or how he is doing. The forest department has not disclosed any information about him. Wildlife biologists and those who are familiar with elephant behaviour tell us how the trauma of capture and release shapes an elephant. Elephants released back into the forest after capture change their behaviour considerably. Even though the long-term effects of capture and relocation on the wellbeing and mental health of an elephant are understudied, some have observed elephants become disoriented in unfamiliar habitats, roaming without purpose, or come into conflict with other dominant bull elephants in the new region and get

injured.[23] Elephants are social animals with complex emotional and social bonds who behave in accordance with the shared collective memory of the landscape, food sources, and regular movement paths. They move and act in groups. Even though elephant bulls are described as solitary animals in elephant biology literature,[24] we now know that they form groups, friendships, and cooperate in their home environment.[25] Biologists have observed that separation from their companions and environment, as experienced by Arikomban, can disorient and shatter an elephant.

Many people who knew him spoke of Arikomban with affection while also taking the precautions of not getting too close to him and respecting that he, like all other-free ranging and captive elephants, could act unpredictably and aggressively in certain situations. Some people who knew Arikomban closely had also observed that he was the leading bull in the elephant herd living near Chinnakanal, keeping close to them even when he was not in his annual musth, the period when the elephant bull's testosterone levels rise and produce behavioural and emotional changes. People had observed that female elephants in the herd also liked to select Arikomban as a mating partner.[26] Thus, he played an important part in the social and reproductive life of the elephant community in that small mosaic forest patch of South India. His capture and relocation was a traumatic event.

Arikomban's story shows that desires are part of an elephant's personality. His desire for rice gives insight into Arikomban's experiences, situated in the socio-political history of the fragmented forest

23 Some elephants have died soon after their relocation, such as the tusker Radhakrishnan, who was relocated from the Nilgiris to the Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve and who slipped nearly 20 feet on a rain-soaked slope, fell on a road, and died, an unusual accident for an elephant. Some foresters speculated that as he was blind on one eye, his compromised eyesight might have impeded his spatial judgement. Others have postulated that the lingering influence of the tranquillizer might have disturbed his balance.

24 Sukumar, *The Living Elephants*.

25 Srinivasaiah et al., "All-Male Groups".

26 Among elephants, females select their mating partners. Some bulls never get to mate at all. People who had observed Arikomban told us that he played an important role in securing offspring in the herd.

landscape of Chinnakanal where he lived in close contact with people, tourist centres, infrastructural development, liquor brewing centres, townships, and small houses. Arikomban's story tells us how the politics around the conservation regime and land and resource interests make use of an elephant. While the latter use their fragmented knowledge to single out certain individuals as causes of conflict situations, the department manages the situation by removing the identified individual. The villagers at Chinnakanal told us that Chakkakomban, Arikomban and other female elephants and calves continue to live alongside people, at times experiencing conflict. We don't know how they, as individuals and groups, react and adjust to the new human activities and to the gap caused by the removal of a mature bull elephant from that small, confined population. And we don't know how the trauma of capture and relocation, of the loss of their social group, home range, and friends impacts Arikomban and other elephants. Undoubtedly these experiences change these animals and, thus, the suffering of both the animals and the humans will continue.

Engaging with aspects of Arikomban's biography has given us insights into the political ecology of conservation and the politics of human-wildlife conflicts in South India.[27] Through Arikomban, we have learned how elephant personalities are relational, in the sense that place, time, and politics are inscribed in their very beings. They are shaped by the landscape, human activities and their land use practices, changes in settlement, economic patterns, and infrastructural development, in addition to many other factors. Elephants have the agency to react to the situations in which they live, even as they deal with trauma and captivity. At the same time, Arikomban's story shows how the individualization of an elephant can also become a political instrument to promote anti-wildlife interests, leading to more violence.

27 See also Anoop and Ganesh. "The Forests and Elephants".

Kalloor Komban: Charisma

Kalloor Komban was a somewhat stout elephant bull of medium height. He was at the peak of his vitality, age about twenty-five, when he started gathering other bulls to go on foraging expeditions. Kalloor Komban would lead others into the paddy fields to feed on human-cultivated crops. People recognized him easily because he only had a small stump for a tail. He spent most of his time in and near the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary (WWS), which is part of the connected network of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (NBR), India's largest biosphere reserve under UNESCO's *Man and the Biosphere* Programme. The elephant was especially likely to visit Wayanad in summer as the area offers a more moist and cooler climate than do the drier, lower-lying regions of the NBR in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Like Arikomban, Kalloor Komban was fond of human-cultivated crops, but rather than rice, he was particularly attracted to paddy and known as a so-called "crop raider". To gain better access to paddy, Kalloor Komban led what biologists have recently described as an "all-male crop-raiding group",[28] a gang of elephant bulls, to the fields near the village of Kalloor from which he received his name. Traditionally, biologists portrayed mature elephant bulls as solitary, roaming for food and only joining an elephant herd while searching for a mate during musth.[29] However, Kalloor Komban expanded what biologists know about the behavioural spectrum of elephant bulls. His observable traits of strength, calmness, and confidence gave him a nonhuman "charisma" that united other bulls around him.

In the human realm, charisma is the ability of certain individuals to attract others to their leadership. For Max Weber, in *Law in Economy and Society*, charisma sets a person apart from others and gives that person exceptional powers or qualities. Weber describes charismatic leaders as magnetic, as strong orators, risk-takers, passionate, determined, and possessed of a strong presence. The case of Kalloor Komban demonstrates that the notion of charisma also applies to

28 Srinivasaiah et al., "All-Male Groups".

29 Sukumar, *The Living Elephants*; Keerthipriya et al., "Musth and Its Effects".

elephants. Concretely, we aim to show that male elephants are attracted to and followed by other elephant bulls. Whether they are leaders or followers is determined by their particular qualities, such as their skill at making friends, ability to develop strategies for resistance, and their capacity to build emotional bonds with others and to lead them. Kalloor Komban formed friendships with other bulls and led them to strategic locations where they could feed more safely on human-cultivated crops. Kalloor Komban became the lead bull in the group as he learned to identify the best food sources, stayed calm even in stressful situations, faced danger with confidence, planned his foraging expeditions into human fields, and safely led the other bulls to food. Kalloor Komban's story tells us that an individual animal's charisma may also be recognized by an animal's conspecifics.

Kalloor Komban stood out from other elephant bulls, according to the people who lived close to him. Farmers, members of the forest department's chasing team, members from the Adivasi communities, and others who knew him described him as fearless as he silently emerged from the bamboo thickets on the forest fringes and walked into their fields. He moved elegantly, calmly, and quietly, they told us, without reacting to the firecrackers or torches that farmers threw at him to drive him out of their fields. Kalloor Komban never showed anger or aggression toward people; he simply came to quietly eat rice and other crops. The rice farmers from Kalloor who knew him also identified him as very careful and gentle visitor of the paddy fields, eating in a corner of the field and doing no damage to the rest. He would return to the same area the next day to eat what was left, not stepping on any of the plants that remained standing. He would pull up the paddy with his trunk and hit it against his leg to clean it, and he would collect small pieces of grass and grain from the ground and soften them as a bunch with his trunk before pushing them into his mouth. His habit and ability to forage the field neatly and systematically, moving from one side to the other, led farmers to nickname him Koythendram, a "rice harvesting machine".

Some farmers were convinced that Kalloor Komban, as the leader of the bull group, strategized to outsmart the human efforts to prevent

elephants from eating their crops. Rice growers in Wayanad built watchtowers in their fields to spot animals that come at night to forage and to scare them off with fire, firecrackers, or drums. Kalloor Komban and the elephant bulls who followed him would appear in the paddy fields at sunset. One of the elephants would show himself near a watchtower, distracting the farmers. The other elephants would then forage on the rice undisturbed in another location entirely. The elephants under Kalloor Komban's leadership took turns taking the role of decoy. Even though people were disturbed and complained about his habit of crop-raiding, they identified Kalloor Komban as a "gentleman" and called him Barathan SI, a short name usually used for the Sub-Inspector of Police, who leads other police officers on difficult missions. The farmers imagined Kalloor Komban as the leader of the raiding team and the other bulls as his subordinates, recognizing the qualities of risk-taking, courage, and leadership.

The formation of all-male groups among elephants, like the one led by Kalloor Komban, is a relatively new phenomenon. Elephants have always fed on people's lands. There are references to paddy crop raids in the Tamil Sangam literature, from the early centuries of the Common Era [30] and poems about cultivators defending their crops from elephants.[31] Yet biologists have observed that the way the elephants choose to access human crops has changed in a more intensely used and inhabited anthropogenic landscape. Biologists describe the formation of bull-crop raiding groups as an "adaptive social strategy".[32] Among African elephants, recent research has revealed the grouping behaviour of bull elephants and the role of one leading bull in such groups.[33] Dr Arun Zachariya, an experienced wildlife veterinarian and disease ecologist at Muthanga Wildlife Sanctuary, who has led many capture operations and done long-term research on the region's elephants, explained to us in a personal conversation that joint crop-raiding has evolved as a strategy among

30 Cited in Sukumar, *The Story of Asia's Elephants*, 131-139.

31 Sukumar, 139.

32 Srinivasaiah et al., "All-Male Groups".

33 O'Connell, "Secrets of the Pachyderm".

elephant bulls to reduce risk when searching for nutritious food. Kalloor Komban and his team were the first such group in South India that Dr Arun documented.

The development of bull groups in response to a changed anthropogenic environment is also testimony to what scholars call "elephant culture" emerging in the Anthropocene in relationship with people.[34] Elephants have culture in the sense that they pass on acquired knowledge and behavioural traits to each other. As elephants grow up, they learn from their elders. Male elephant calves usually grow up in all-female herds and, in puberty, separate from the herd, living a mostly solitary life.[35] Elephants educate their young, and knowledge is passed down over generations. Biologists and others have observed that the schooling of the younger generation of elephants happens in the herd and is led by the matriarch, the oldest female.[36] More recently, however, scholars have discovered that, as in the case of Kalloor Komban, bulls sometimes team up into all-male groups through which they form friendships, transmit knowledge, and teach the young .[37] Living in a human-dominated landscape, young bulls learn from experienced bulls where to feed and how to reduce risk while moving through highly guarded and fenced habitats. As the farmers in Kalloor observed, young bulls who used to run away when humans lit firecrackers or made other sounds to scare them away, learned from the older bulls that the sound could be ignored. After a few foraging expeditions with the older bulls, the younger ones also learned which areas were safe and which were not and gained confidence.

Kalloor Komban's personality did not just draw his fellow elephants to him. It also attracted the attention of the people who encountered him. According to the villagers and forest department staff, he did not kill any human beings, did not charge at anyone, and he did not damage any houses. Yet his desire for crops, his fearlessness in

34 Anoop, Krishnan, and Ganesh, "Elephants in the Farm"; Mumby and Plotnik, "Taking the Elephants'"; Plotnik and Jacobson, "A 'Thinking Animal'".

35 Sukumar, *The Living Elephants*.

36 Lahdenperä, Mar, and Lummaa, "Nearby Grandmother"; Sukumar, *The Living Elephants*.

37 Srinivasaiah et al., "All-Male Groups"; Srinivasaiah et al., "Usual Populations".

organizing other elephants, and his confidence got him into trouble. Farmers agitated and called for action. The media reported on the wild tusker, embellishing and sensationalizing descriptions of Kalloor Komban, describing him as a nightmare for farmers. To monitor and prevent him from entering human habitats, the elephant was tranquilized and radio-collared three times between 2014 and 2016, yet his adventures continued. Finally, on 22 November 2016, in response to continued protests from the farmer organizations, the forest department captured Kalloor Komban and transferred him to the Muthanga elephant camp.

Capturing elephants, keeping them captive, and requiring them to work are not new practices in this landscape. This forested region of the Western Ghats, now part of Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, has been a source for ivory for over two thousand years. Environmental historians have taught us that this landscape has also been an important source of captive elephants for over two millennia.[38] The Malabar coast had trade connections with the Roman Empire, West Asia, and China for centuries, exporting goods such as spices and ivory. It remained a centre of ivory trade under the strict rules of the British during the colonial period.[39] Photographs and descriptions in the museums of Mysore and Bangalore show evidence of large-scale elephant capture in this region at the time of British occupation, whereas other historical records show that the Rajas of this region used elephants even before the arrival of the British. Elephants have been captured in pits in Wayanad from time immemorial but systematic capture was started in 1896 by the British. Seventeen elephants were captured by a British district forest officer, Marshall. Since then, capture operations have occurred yearly with the exception of 1901. Between 1896 and 1903, eighty-three elephants were captured. In the *Gdhha operation*, large numbers of elephants were herded into a vast trap made of ropes and bamboo by the Mysore Rajas under British control. This practice was well documented as both a source of entertainment and a way to capture numerous elephants at once.

38 Morrison, *Forests, Foragers*; Trautmann, *Elephants and Kings*.

39 Lingaraju, "Tipu Sultan".

The Muthanga elephant camp, where Kalloor Komban now lives, was established as an elephant camp by the British, who used captured trained elephants and Adivasi workers to harvest teak and other valuable trees from the forest and to establish timber plantations.[40] During British occupation, more than one hundred elephants resided in the camp. The captive elephants worked for the forest department, assisting with capturing "wild" elephants in pits and training them, extracting valuable hardwood such as teak and rosewood, and starting from the 1930s, preparing lands to become teak plantations. Postcolonial India's Forest Department continued the capture training and the use of elephant labour for the management of timber plantations. In 1972, India passed the Wildlife (Protection) Act, banning elephant capture. As per the department records, there were sixty-six elephants in Muthanga camp in 1970, and the department eventually sold many of them. A few elephants remained in the camp in Wayanad until the 1980s, used by the forest department for various purposes, but no more elephants were captured. During these years, the department did continue training and captivity of those elephants who had accidently fallen inadvertently into old capture pits. In the early 1980s, protests by environmental activists of the Wayanad Prakrithi Samrakshana Samithi WPSS (Wayanad's Nature Protection Group) put a halt to all the camp's activities. At that time, following the controversial capture of an elephant calf, WPSS filed a case and, finally, a court order stopped elephant captivity and training in Wayanad.

The Indian (Wildlife) Act of 1972 still upholds the prohibition on and the wilful capture of healthy elephants to use for timber work. However, since 2014, the forest department has gradually changed its strategy to use kumki elephants for managing the then rising human-elephant conflict in the region. As its new strategy, the forest department now captures the elephants identified as "problematic individuals", who raid crops or kill people. In the last years, the Muthanga elephant camp has expanded, as captured "problematic" elephants are increasingly trained as kumki elephants to chase "wild"

40 See also Münster, "Working for the Forest".

elephants from the fields and help the forest department in its mission to capture more "problematic" individuals. The forest department decided to invest more money and staff in the camp activities by employing more mahouts, bringing in more trained kumki elephants, training the resident elephants, and capturing free-ranging, problematic elephants to train as kumkis. Kalloor Komban was the first individual elephant in this list of captured trained kumki.

On his arrival at Muthanga, Kalloor Komban was held in a 15 × 15″ wooden cage called a *kraal*. He remained there for two years. Then, in 2018, the Forest Department released him from the cage and began training him to be a kumki elephant. He became part of the RRT that included forest officials, local watchers, mahouts, and other kumki elephants. As a team, they were deployed to the forest fringes in response to farmers' requests for wild elephants to be chased out of their fields. Kalloor Komban worked for the forest department under a government order to help capture individual elephants classified as problematic, as he once was. Kalloor Komban thus entered his "second life" in captivity, serving people in their attempt to control his free-ranging conspecifics. Under a new name, Bharath, he is now part of the forest department's workforce. He became the "brave and famous" kumki elephant of Muthanga elephant camp, a favourite of people and forest officials all over the state.

Kalloor Komban-cum-Bharath also continued to be a charismatic figure for his pre-capture, free-ranging elephant friends. Even in captivity, Kalloor Komban continued his bull-group friendships. The four elephant bulls who had been members of his crop-foraging team during his free-ranging life visited him every night in his kraal at the elephant camp. They stood near the kraal while Bharath fed them with food provided by the forest department. It took the department staff six months of constantly chasing away the visiting elephants before they stopped coming to see Kalloor Komban. During his second life in captivity, Kalloor Komban attracted other bulls as well. He developed a new, especially close relationship with one elephant, Siva, who had been captured in Aralam and who was held in a kraal near his. According to the reports of mahouts, staff, and media, on the day

of his release, just before his kraal door was opened, Kalloor Komban leaned over to Siva's kraal and made some soft sounds. Suddenly, when his kraal was opened, both Kalloor Komban and Siva trumpeted loudly, charged, and attempted to break free. Then, Kalloor Komban pulled with such force that he broke three of the four chains attached to his legs. Siva managed to damage his kraal but was unable to break out and run away. According to the officials and trainers, Kalloor Komban's behaviour was unusual for an elephant as trained as he was, which caught the team in charge off guard. They fired a tranquilizer dart, immobilizing him and bringing him back into captivity. This sequence of events shows that, even in captivity, individual elephants have the agency to communicate and resist.[41]

In 2018, Bharath befriended Vadakkanad Komban, a tusker named after a village on the fringes of Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary where he had been captured. Vadakkanad Komban, a long-time crop-raider, had killed a boy from an Advivasi community at the forest edges, leading to a government order for his capture. Caged at Muthanga, Vadakkanad Komban was released from the kraal at about the same time as Kalloor Komban and was given the name Vikram. Both elephants underwent kumki training with experienced mahouts at the same time and became friends. Not much is known about the ways in which elephant bulls form friendships. Elephant biologists who have recently studied communication patterns among elephants using bioacoustics have written about new, evolving friendships among male elephants in conflict situations.[42] At Muthanga elephant camp, Barath and Vikram are known as the "buddies" of Muthanga RRT in Kerala for their friendship both inside the camp and during operations. According to the mahouts, despite the differences in their personalities, they move together, exchange information through minute gestures with their trunks, ear flaps and a variety of sounds, and act in coordination in daily life and during operations.

41 See also Davé and Gupta, "The Homoxenoerotics"; Hari, "Talking Elephants".

42 See: https://www.coexistenceconsortium.com/post/the-strategists-all-male-herds, Accessed 5 June 2025. For African elephants, see O'Connell, "Secrets of the Pachyderm Boys Club".

The life that Bharath lived in the camp bore little resemblance to his free-ranging life as Kalloor Komban. The elephants in the camp cannot take long walks across the land. They do not have the chance to search for their own food. There are no nights and days and no seasons. But there is routine care that sometimes takes a violent form, and humans that set the pace and give commands. Life in a camp starts in the tiny kraal in which the elephant cannot move its body, lie down, or walk. The mahouts touch the elephant's body from all sides, using things like sticks, brooms, and even sharp objects like sharpened bamboo sticks to accustom the elephant to human touch. The forest department feeds them, usually sugar cane and harvested grass. The veterinary doctor examines the elephant, assesses its health, and provides any needed medicine. After a long period of confinement, irritation by human touch, and a new diet, the elephant is released for training. With the ropes, stones, sounds, rewards, care, and pain, the elephant is made to submit to human commands. The forest department claims that the elephants in Muthanga camp are kept in a "semi-wild" state and are taken to the forest to graze during the day. Vishnu, the biologist, told us that there were instances when the bulls in their musth did not return at the end of the day and that the females mate with wild bulls. But Kalloor Komban — Bharath — never had the opportunity to meet up with his friends in the forest. He was brought to the fields to chase them away. He never got to eat ripe paddy from a field or show his courage and lead a group of elephant bulls on an adventure. Rather, he was fed cooked rice and ragi with jaggery in the morning, sent for a bath during which a mahout rubbed his skin in expectation of friendship or obedience, then marched to the forest to graze in the wild, and then brought back in the evening. In captivity, all is routine.

During his daily life in the camp, Bharath showed himself to be a calm and somewhat inert individual. The forest employees at Muthanga elephant camp described him and his second life in captivity as follows:

> He is a poor fellow; food is his only weakness. If you show him some food and ask him to follow you, he will accompany you

> to Kalpetta, the nearby town. Sometimes, we take elephants to the forest for grazing. If we don't tie him somewhere, he will return to the eating house (Oottupura) at the camp as he knows there he will get food. He is lazy and never shows interest in roaming around for food, eating grass from the ground or breaking tree branches for leaves, rather, he prefers to pull a tree and eat it from where he is standing. He is happy with anything that can be eaten, even if it is a tablet.

Usually, feeding pills or tablets to elephants is difficult. For example, Sundari, another elephant at the camp, does not like to swallow pills. Even if the pills are hidden in her bowl of cooked rice with jaggiri (sarkkara kanji), she eats the rice and then spits the tablet out. Vishnu, the biologist at the Muthanga wildlife sanctuary, told us that Bharath also acts differently toward Dr Arun, the veterinarian. Usually, elephants dislike the veterinarian, as he gives them medicine and injections. They stand still when he walks by or appears on the scene; some throw stones at him with their trunks. Bharath, however, will not only swallow a pill; he will take it himself with his trunk and place it inside his mouth. The mahouts who work closely with the elephants, including Bharath, said that although the daily routines do not vary at camp, each elephant reacts differently to the monotony. "It is important to know the elephant first, to be a good mahout. Only the people who love them can understand the individual in them—*snehichale aale manassilakkan pattoo*. Then only we can work with them". The mahouts identify Bharath as fond of food and easy to manage by giving him his favourite food.

When Kalloor Komban was trained to become Bharath, he became part of the more-than-human history of elephant captivity at the Muthanga elephant camp. His capture in 2014 marked a turning point in the history of using elephants for conflict mitigation, employing trained kumki elephants to manage "problematic elephants". The government decided to form an RRT) with trained elephants to chase wild elephants from the fields and to also to develop a team to capture problem elephants. Thus, the camp grew as the number of elephants expanded and additional humans

(mahouts and watchers) were employed. Until then, only six elephants had been adopted by the camp after being identified as injured or abandoned as calves, as Soorya had been. Most had come to the camp at a very young age. They grew up around the traditional mahouts and their families, becoming accustomed to them. The mahout families were mostly from Kattunaikka and Uralikuruma, the two Adivasi communities in South India famous for their skill in managing elephants.[43] Usually, the forest department assigns one mahout per elephant, giving him a daily-wage agreement. If the elephant is a calf, a human family, often that of the mahout, assumes responsibility for the animal. For an outsider, it seems like a twenty-four-hour, year-round job, but for a mahout it means living with an animal he loves, they told us. Taking care of the elephant, feeding them, teaching them commands in their language, training social gestures, punishing them for disobedience, treating them for illnesses, teaching them dos and don'ts are all part of daily life. Life in an elephant camp, for both the elephants and the humans, follows daily routines, adheres to a set of norms and rituals, and is marked by hierarchies, networks, and friendships. Both workers and animals undergo enculturation, which involves accepting and adjusting to the power structure in a camp, the camp's social system, its modes, and processes. For Kalloor Komban, becoming "enculturated" into camp life meant learning to live with humans, to submit to their will, to show and accept affection and obedience, and to eat cooked food for the first time.

Bharath's social life was different in captivity from Kalloor Komban's life as a free-ranging elephant. His charisma and other strong personality traits still attracted fellow elephants and, together, in captivity, they formed a new culture. The forest department exploited elephant traits — grouping together, communicating with each other, connecting emotionally to each other, following a lead elephant — to motivate the other animals, manage the camp, form RRTs, and mitigate conflicts between humans and animals in the villages. After the 2014 decision to keep captive kumkis at the camp,

43 See also Münster, "Working for the Forest".

the forest department brought in more elephants, among them Kunju, the most powerful kumki in the camp who came from Kodanad, another camp in Kerala; Pramugha, from Karnataka; and Surendran, from Konni. The government also initiated training for kumki elephants at Muthanga. Initially Kunju, Surendran, and Soorya, the elephant bull who, according to forest staff, had been abandoned as a calf in the forest and who grew up in Muthanga, were all sent to Muthumalai, the famous elephant camp at Theppakadu in Tamil Nadu, for three months of training.

In his second life, Bharath became the leader of the new team of kumki elephants at Muthanga camp, ready for capture operations after training. As forest officials proudly told us, he was the best kumki they had ever had. As a trained kumki, forced to obey commands, Bharath's strength and power became an asset for human use. The forest department found his charisma useful in capture operations. Videos of the operations show the elephant being compelled by his mahout, who uses verbal and bodily commands, such as tapping the elephant's legs and feet to push them forward, to act on another elephant, pulling, pushing, and even charging if necessary. The kumki cannot withdraw even if the elephant wishes to as armed men are riding on top of them and in vehicles next to them, so the elephant knows it must obey. It draws on learned traits from living on the forest fringe, from being trained to submit to human will. The biologist Vishnu from Muthanga elephant camp told us that kumki elephants become what they are through training through which humans establish dominance over them. The initial training in the kraal conditions the elephant to recognize and respond to the mahout's voice and to take food from humans. Further training occurs outside the kraal. This involves habituating the elephant to live with people under their control. The elephant is trained to perform a series of manoeuvres in response to a mahout's commands. For example, the elephant learns to bite onto a rope and pull it against another elephant, then lower the rope, then pull it up, step on it, step out of it, pull it. These acts became routinized through repeated training that involves punishment when the elephant does not act as commanded and rewards when the

elephant follows the commands. An elephant that doesn't comply will obviously experience more punishments than one that does. The experience of training varies depending on the mahout's personality, and the individual elephant's personality. Some mahouts are more skilful than others, some are harsher to the elephant and use more violence than others. The necessarily close relationship of a mahout with the elephant is characterized as "ambivalent intimacy".[44] Once the elephant dependably follows the commands of the mahout, it is deemed obedient; it is a "good" kumki for the forest department.

Bharath, a "good" kumki, is fearless and calm when chasing elephants out of the field. He pushes sedated elephants into trucks on command. In performing these operations, Bharath acts against his own friends and maybe also against his own desire. As an active member of the RRT, he now coerces his own brothers, friends, and lovers who are continuing to do what they learned from him: communicate and work together to outsmart human strategies to keep them away from the crops. Bharath, as a good kumki, continues to have charisma in the sense that he can guide, lead, and influence other elephants. Yet, as Bharath, he is no longer self-driven but impelled by his human commanders. He has learned to expand an elephant's behavioural repertoire, adapting it to the new realities—a fragmented, risk-filled, human-dominated landscape.

The charisma of elephant bulls and their masculine strength in the context of captive settings have obscured the violence involved in submitting them to human control. There is a long tradition in South India's popular culture of admiring and even worshipping individual elephants living in captivity at temples and in private custody. These elephants are kept to perform their duties in temple rituals, having been forced to parade at the annual temple festivals at least since the eleventh century.[45] Heroic stories and myths of the majestic bodies of temple elephants, their strength, intelligence, and devotion to people and gods circulate in children's

44 Münster, "Working for the Forest".

45 Trautmann, *Elephants and Kings*;

literature, folk songs, TV shows, popular media, and literature. In many of these narratives the individualization of a captive elephant as a hero leads and ascribing him with heroic characteristics leads to the romanticization of captive life and the obfuscation of violence and trauma involved in taming, training, and handling captive elephants. As animal studies scholar Krishnanunni Hari puts it: "The vocabularies used to describe temple elephants in Kerala as majestic and sacred animals erase their natural histories and the brutality of their enslavement".[46] The normalization of captive life and the heroization of individual elephants has been widely criticized both in South Indian public discourse, and in the scientific literature.[47] Scholars of queer animal studies have shown us how the charisma of "rogue" and dominant elephant bulls is connected to the celebration of male (sexual) power and notions of dominant masculinity. As Naisargi N. Davé and Alok H. Gupta tell us: "Since the time of the war elephant, male elephants have been desired by men for capture precisely because of the dominance, power, spectacle, and rage that tuskers display in musth".[48] In the case of Kalloor Komban, the leadership abilities he developed in the company of elephants were then (mis)used for humans to subjugate other elephants.

Becoming a member of an RRT deployed to "mitigate" human-elephant conflict produces a more-than-human culture, created through cross-species collaboration. RRTs comprise humans — forest officers, watchers, mahouts — and elephants, as well as vehicles and weapons, all of which are deployed in a coordinated and synchronized way to achieve an objective. Vishnu, the wildlife biologist, told us that mahouts and elephants need to be trained together to build human-elephant cooperation, synchronicity, and teamwork. The performance of a kumki is determined in part by the elephant and in part by the mahout. The mahout's vision, knowledge, and skills are important and an understanding between the mahout and the elephant must be established. The mahouts commonly

46 Hari, "Talking Elephants".

47 Choudhury, "Elephants and People"; Hari, "Talking Elephants"; Kurt et al., "Giants in Chains".

48 Davé and Gupta, "The Homoxenoerotics," 399.

say that "*anachoru kolachoranu*" (the food earned from working with elephants) is equal to death food. They thus express the danger and unpredictability of working with kumki elephants and interacting with free-ranging elephants. Both the mahouts and elephants thus experience fear and helplessness in relation to the forest department, under which both work. As Vishnu told us, mahouts and elephants first work together to treat diseased or injured wild elephants or to observe darted and tranquilized animals. These outings allow the kumki and the mahout to develop confidence in each other as a team and train the kumki to show dominant behaviour over other animals during operations under the command of the mahout. The mahouts develop and use a variety of commands that stimulate specific responses from the elephants. An RRT involves hierarchy, rewards for obedience, and punishment for disobedience as well as care and attachment and a range of emotions for both humans and elephants. In this way, the mahouts and elephants co-create knowledge and behavioural patterns in service to the government.

The RRT's capture operations involve close contact with free-ranging animals, are violent, and exploit the elephants' emotions. These operations are initiated according to strict guidelines because of the safety issues involved, the public attention they attract, and the laws that govern them. The Indian Wildlife Protection Act (1972) prohibits any kind of capture, killing, or hunting of wild animals. However, if an animal is proven to be a danger to human life, Section 11 of the Act allows hunting (including capture), if ordered by the Central Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change through the Chief Wildlife Warden, the highest-ranking government official typically heading the wildlife wing of a state's forest department, responsible for the administration and management of protected areas like national parks and sanctuaries, and for implementing wildlife protection laws. Although capturing a wild animal is not an easy decision, political pressure to capture animals identified as problematic has increased due to rising numbers of incidents of human-elephant interactions that have led to human death or crop loss.

The number of captures of "problematic" elephants in Kerala has grown significantly in recent years. They involve veterinarians, government officials, and RRTs. The media, animal rights activists, organizations such as KIFA work to solve the human-animal conflict permanently through law, and the general public usually watch the operation in person or through the media. Kumki elephants, including Bharath, are transported to the action site in a truck, and fed well with tasty and nutritious food. Sometimes, the kumkis are kept away from the elephant that is targeted for capture lest the elephant sense their presence and run off. After the "target elephant" has been tranquillized, the RRT pushes the kumkis toward the sedated animal and directs them to force the elephant to rise on their feet, which they do using their tusks and trunks. They then are commanded to push the elephant toward the waiting truck. Sometimes the sedated elephant resists, and the mahouts forcefully push on the back of the kumkis' ears with their foot, a signal that tells them to exert more force. The kumkis will push on the sedated elephant's back or head, depending on how the animal is positioned, sometimes wounding it. Both the kumkis and the mahouts persist, working together to push the animal into the truck. As Vishnu says, the success of the mission depends on the mahouts' relationship with the kumkis.

The mahouts and the kumkis are part of a culture inculcated in the camp and in the RRTs that includes codes of communication, signals of caution, warnings, learned routines, and, certainly, fear. Behavioural biologists describe culture among elephants as the learned behaviours, traditions, and social norms transmitted within a group through social learning and across generations.[49] Elephants in captivity co-create culture by learning from other elephants and from the humans who work closely with them, communicating among themselves, learning from each other, and developing survival strategies. The personality of certain individual elephants has significantly influenced these processes. Bharath's charisma added value to the revamped Muthanga elephant camp and shaped its culture,

49 Bates et al., "Knowledge Transmission".

as the elephant became the leader of the kumkis and the RRT operations. The elephant camps and RRTs are a co-evolved, co-working space marked by some violence and unpredictability; they create an interface and contact zone between humans and elephants both of which must survive under the stress of environmental degradation and human-elephant "conflict". Individual elephants, such as Bharath, and their unique abilities and characteristics are used and celebrated in many nuanced ways by the state and the current conservation regime that manage these zones. The identified traits of individual elephants, especially their strength, dominance, bravery, and violence, are used by mainstream anti-wildlife groups to single out individuals and demand their capture and removal. The life of Kalloor Komban turned Bharath has shown us the way that the life of each individual elephant in the human dominated landscape of south India is enmeshed within layers of interventions, such as land and resource politics, media, law, and conservation and conflict governance. Thus, an elephant may live many different lives in one lifetime, experiencing sharp and traumatic changes that have consequences for the individual and the social and cultural lives they lead together with people and their conspecifics.

Soorya: Aversions

Soorya became an elephant in captivity and among people. Abandoned as a calf, he was rescued in 1994 by the forest department at Muthanga camp, where he was raised and now lives alongside Bharath and other captive elephants. Soorya arrived at the camp when it was inactive, so he did not undergo any training other than being taught basic commands, such as "*va*" (come) and "*po*" (go). He drank milk from a nippled bottle and was given medication, cooked food, and a bath every day. Soorya never roamed in the forest, did not have a social life with the other free-ranging elephants, never formed friendships with older bulls, and didn't learn from his mother, sisters or play with other elephant calves.

Instead, Soorya was raised by people: mahouts and their families and community members who reside in the historical *anna camp colony* (elephant camp colony) of Kattunaikkans, one of Wayanad's

indigenous groups. The Kattunaikkan are known for their knowledge and skill in training, caring for, and even catching elephants. Local pre-colonial rulers and, afterwards, the British occupation and the state, exploited their labour in managing elephants, forest, and timber plantations in the region.[50] As a young calf, Soorya received care from the mahouts, he played with children from the Kattunaikans, and he was loved and cared for by other foresters working for the forestry department at Muthanga. As an old forest labourer told us, Soorya grew up just like a "village boy" and was pampered as a calf. Much of his time was devoted to playing with the other children at the camp: they threw sugar cane pieces into the distance, to make him run and bring them back. Children ran in front of him to draw him into play with them. Soorya received attention and care not just from villagers, the mahouts, and forest officials but also from visitors, such as students attending educational nature camps at Muthanga wildlife sanctuary and tourists visiting the sanctuary.

The mahouts told us that Soorya developed his character and personality in close contact with people. They remember that as a calf, he was fond of playing with people, and he was also naughty (*kusruthi* in Malayalam), in the sense that he had a will of his own, was spontaneous, and did not readily obey orders. Often, Soorya would run behind children's groups, seeking their attention and play. Still today, as an adult elephant, he is naughty and playful, according to the mahouts. Soorya does not respond if people call him, but when they give up and turn away, he runs after them. His personality traits, formed in the company of people, have remained playful, and he continues to have his own will, they told us.

Thus, Soorya was a risky bull to manage. He lacked obedience or submissiveness and he was unafraid of humans, especially when he entered musth. He did not fear humans or other elephants and was unaware of the ways to behave with dominating bulls. According to the literature, elephants usually learn many behavioural traits while living in the wild. One explanation for Soorya's exceptionally unruly behaviour offered by the mahouts was that he had not been

50 Münster, "Working for the Forest".

"educated" or taught how to behave by the mothers in a childhood herd or, later, by older bulls, something that happens in the wild when young bulls leave the herd and form friendships (or fight) with other bulls.[51] As our diverse interlocutors told us, the teaching in the herd and the act of learning from other, older bulls are crucial to the process of becoming a male elephant. As a social animal living in a herd and moving around a large land area, an elephant learns of threats, fears, and strategies to overcome hurdles from fellow elephants, from the landscape, and from rituals and rules within the herd. Becoming an elephant involves a wide range of experiences and bodily and sensory understanding of the landscape and one's own body and instincts. Instead of taking part in the complex social daily life of an elephant herd, Soorya had lived his life as part of the elephant camp, under daily human rhythms and control. The formal kumki training for Soorya was initiated in 2018. However, it was difficult to train him with the same mahouts who pampered him. So, the forest department sent him along with two other elephants to Muthumalai elephant camp in Tamil Nadu, famous for elephant training, for three months. This is where Soorya experienced a crucial transformation in his life.

At Muthumalai, Soorya underwent the training to become a kumki. The training continued at Muthanga until Soorya became attuned to human dominance and acted according to the forest official's and mahout's commands. Eventually, Soorya became a member of the prestigious Wayanad RRT of Kerala's forest department that manages "human elephant conflict". Wayanad RRT's human-elephant team is renowned in South India for their skills in capturing, tranquilizing, and relocating "problematic" elephants and tigers. The team has been acknowledged by the newspapers and the forest department for its successful and efficient performance. As a member of the RRT, Soorya started moving out to the villages with other kumki elephants to chase free-ranging elephants that had entered human habitations and fields. Vishnu told us that turning Soorya into a kumki was a slow process, despite him having all the

51 Srinivasaiah et al., "All-Male Groups"; Sukumar, *The Living Elephants*.

traits to be a good kumki given his large size and long, heavy tusks. Unlike Bharath, Soorya acted not as a leader but as a team member who moved alongside the other elephants and their human commanders. He was part of many risky operations of Wayanad RRT, including the capture of Arikomban. Although in the camp Soorya was identified as a naughty and unruly individual living on his own terms, he became an active member in Kerala's elephant-capturing operations.

The mahouts had to deal with the effects of Soorya's upbringing among loving humans. Unlike many other kumkis who were handled by two different mahouts, Soorya only tolerated one person. Usually, camp elephants can be managed in emergency situations by any mahout who is familiar with them. But Soorya could not be managed by others; he would not go with them or obey their commands. On some days, if he did not have the willingness to go for a bath or graze in the forest, he would not move. If a mahout put more pressure on him, he showed aggression by trumpeting, raising his trunk, or hitting back. Soorya's selective disobedience meant that he received a lot of attention from his mahout.

Although the elephant group at the camp was kept under human control, elephants like Soorya built their own species-specific relationships and roles within the system and helped to form a functional elephant group within the camp. This became evident when Soorya assumed the role of a passionate teacher and an affectionate and playful companion to the young. Even though he had never been taught by elephants himself, he exhibited great patience and enthusiasm for teaching and guiding the calves at the camp. He was friendly to the young ones and frequently engaged with them in play. For example, Soorya would throw small stones at them, and expect them to throw them back. He would also tease them by gently hitting them with sticks, slightly kicking them with his trunk, running behind them, hoping that they would enter a play with them. As he usually stayed calm and spent time with them, the calves were also fond of him. When he was angry or in a bad mood, he pushed them away. As behavioural biologist Caitlin O'Connell

writes for African elephants, play is very relevant for their socialization.[52] Play is an act of continuous training to learn many life skills, rituals and social behaviours for elephants. In play, elephants learn rules, ways of conduct, and how to behave in situations of danger. Similarly, it is possible that Soorya, by performing play, might have played the role of an elder bull in the camp to cultivate elephant culture within captivity.

Soorya contributed to the elephant culture at the camp by communicating and passing on information and knowledge to the next generation. This made him unique, since not all elephants assume the role of nurturing young ones. During the musth, however, Soorya's behaviour changed. His tolerance and playfulness with calves disappeared, and his unruliness increased: when calves reached out to him, he swatted them with his trunk, which sometimes led to injuries and bleeding. In this way, as the mahouts told us, calves learned how to behave with respect toward a bull in musth, despite the fact that Soorya had not received this schooling himself. Wildlife veterinarian Arun Zachariya told us that elephant teaching within the herd is an important process between mothers and calves involving punishments and corrections. After elephant bulls have left the herd and lead a more solitary life, they learn from the free ranging bulls they occasionally meet and team up with. They befriend and observe other bulls from a young age. They communicate, remember, and process information. Soorya never learned how to "behave" by imitating his conspecifics in a herd, but he was nevertheless able to teach calves, showing them how to use their trunk, how to catch stones or sticks, and even how to shower water on their body.

Effective communication among elephants involves learning skills from others and transferring knowledge. This is revealed when watching elephants outsmart human technologies and cross human-made barriers such as electric fences, erected to restrict their movement. We watched videos from camera traps and CCTV cameras placed on the forest fringes by researchers, farmers, and the forest department that show older and more experienced elephants

52 O'Connell, "Secrets of the Pachyderm".

teaching the younger ones how to overcome the barriers. For example, we viewed scenes in which older bulls and cows inspired other elephants to pull out a tree trunk, place it on the stone pillars supporting electric fencing, and then step onto the log in such a way that it pushes the electric wires to touch the soil, thereby grounding the wiring and breaking the electrical circuit. Elephants will also use their trunks to test wires for the presence of electricity. If they receive no shock, they signal others to follow them.

Although Soorya had lived a so-called pampered life in the elephant camp, trauma was also part of his biography. He lost his mother and herd when he was still young. He was wounded when the mahouts found him. They speculated that the reason why the calf had been left behind may have been that his mother and herd sensed that he was sick and would not survive. Dr Arun, the wildlife veterinarian, told us that elephants can sense diseases and leave calves behind if their illness is contagious. These are mentioned in literature as rare incidents among elephants who live with complex and strong emotional bonds.[53] Another possible explanation is that Soorya had been threatened by a tiger, and, needing to move on fast, the herd left the wounded calf behind. Or Soorya could have been singled out from the herd in an accident. Whatever the reason, as an abandoned calf, he could not have survived alone and experienced a near-death situation early in his life.

Soorya had not undergone training as a kumki until 2018, but in the camp, he was under human supervision and control through all stages of his growth into a strong adult bull. Not having learned to behave with older elephant bulls in their musth, he often ran towards the free-ranging tuskers who sometimes visited the elephant camp at night and got injured by them. These subtle and frequent traumatic incidents may have played a role in shaping Soorya's behaviour and personality. The training at Muthumalai, which served to break the tough animal's will and condition him to act cooperatively with other kumki elephants in capture operations may also have been hard on Soorya. Later, he was used in several violent capture

53 For the African context, see O'Connell, "Secrets of the Pachyderm".

operations. Although kumkis are employed by RRTs for the larger aim of conserving elephants as a species, the experience of an individual kumki being forced to fight other elephants is a traumatic one.

Just as some elephants such as Arikomban have strong desires, others have strong dislikes. Soorya exhibited extreme aversion and aggressive behaviour whenever he felt discomfort. In one instance, this strong aversion resulted in a fatal accident. Soorya disliked alcohol, in contrast to Arikomban, who was attracted to the smell. From a young age, Soorya showed irritation when he smelled alcohol. The mahouts at Muthanga remember that whenever a mahout or his helper got drunk, Soorya expressed aggression by making loud trumpeting sounds and resisting commands. On many occasions, Soorya became violent in the presence of intoxicated people. One day, Soorya's mahout Appu was heavily drunk. The other mahouts warned him to avoid Soorya, but Appu ignored them, confidently taking Soorya into the forest to graze. The elephant showed some signs of resistance, but it was not until they returned to the camp that Soorya hit Appu and pierced him with his tusks. Afterward, he was calm. Even though the killing was triggered by the alcohol smell, it can also be read as an act of animal resistance against prolonged captivity and suffering.[54] We still don't know what drives the instinct of an elephant to live wild and free. The community mourned Apus' death, and Soorya was chained for a few days. Thereafter, a new mahout was appointed to handle his care at the camp.

What we know about the reason for Soorya's strong dislike and aggressive reaction to the smell of alcohol comes only from what the humans who lived with him have told us. Elephants have an exquisite sense of smell; it is at least twice as powerful as that of dogs and at least five times that of humans. Their remarkable olfactory abilities are important for foraging, social interactions, and the detection of danger, and are thus crucial to their survival. As we know from humans, smell can evoke or trigger a traumatic memory

54 See also Davé and Gupta, "Homoxenoerotics"; Hari, "Talking Elephants". For interpretations of violence by animals against humans as acts of resistance, see also Hribal, "Animals, Agency, and Class"; Hribal, *Fear of the Animal*.

and related response; there is no reason to assume that this isn't also the case for elephants. It is possible that Soorya experienced trauma in relation to the smell of alcohol which induced the aggression; for instance, someone who was intoxicated may have mistreated him. The mahouts told us that many human deaths and injuries from elephant encounters are reportedly associated with alcohol. A recent example is that of an elephant killing an intoxicated man walking through a forest road in Wayanad. Individual elephants exhibit other dislikes as well. People living in communities on the forest's fringes recalled elephants who dislike flashing lights, firecrackers, fire, or loud sounds. They recounted incidents of elephants running aggressively towards humans when exposed to strong dislikes. The villagers and experts both believe that this aggression may be a response to a memory of past or present trauma. Forceful exposure to their dislikes itself may act as a traumatic experience to individuals.

Elephants usually do not intentionally kill humans. Rather, it happens accidentally when people unknowingly get too close to an elephant or vice versa. The elephant might have been startled by the people, or the people might not have seen the elephant. But some elephants will chase and kill, we were told. Usually, these are elephants with individual histories of ill-treatment or trauma. A habituated "conflict animal" tends to defend themselves or attack humans because they regularly face attacks from humans who, for example, throw stones, firecrackers, or burn vehicle tires onto them. As farmers, mahouts, and others told us, an elephant who faces such conflicts every day will respond aggressively, having identified human beings as a threat. In such cases, elephants attack as a strategy of escaping human threats.

Stories from Soorya's life reveal the ways in which captivity and camp culture shape the process of becoming an elephant. They reveal how humans raised a tough and aggressive elephant through "care" and "pampering". Forest officials use the language of "care" to describe elephant captivity even though such care means the establishment of human dominance over the animal and submitting it to

human will and control. The official position of the forest department is that a "good" kumki is an animal who works for them and alongside them to "manage" and dominate his conspecifics in the wild. But kumkis are animals that are directed by humans to act in a forced-choice situation of either reward or punishment.

Elephants, the largest social animals on land, demonstrate complex social structures centred on learning and intergenerational cultural transmission. In addition to possessing a complex social structure, elephants exhibit an extensive communicative repertoire, using vocalizations and chemical, tactile, and visual signals. These abilities are likely to support or contribute to forms of social learning. Elephants are empathic and understand the goals of others. They exhibit complex responses to dead conspecifics and have the capacity for self-awareness.[55] Elephants also share collective memories and form strong emotional bonds with individuals within the herd and with other members in their species. The collective memory consists of individual memories of migratory routes, food sources, dangers, and sites where a group member died among other things, as well as behaviours useful to specific situations and those reflective of a rich emotional life, such as the act of revisiting the site of a death which suggests mourning.[56] Dr Arun Zacharia told us in a personal conversation that he has observed elephant herds paying homage to dead individuals[57]. The herd stands still as a group in the location where they lost a fellow elephant. If pieces of bone remain, they touch and smell them. These behaviors are repeated whenever the herd crosses that location. We do not know what these acts contribute to the process of becoming an individual elephant. Recent studies of elephant behaviour suggest the importance of social learning, transmitted knowledge, and patterns of learned behaviour to the process of becoming an elephant.[58] Soorya, as an orphaned elephant calf under human care, grew up without these experiences and thus, unsurprisingly, developed a unique personality.

55 Bates et al., "Knowledge Transmission".

56 Sukumar, *The Living Elephants*

57 Zachariya, personal communication

58 See, for example, Bates et al., "Knowledge Transmission".

Conclusion: Becoming Elephant

In getting to know Arikomban, Bharath and Soorya, three individual elephants with distinct life histories and characters, we have learned that elephant personalities are relational, evolving and co-becoming in a particular historically situated place alongside people. For each of these elephants, we have highlighted a particular characteristic that is significant to the way they behave and act within the natural-cultural contact zones of conservation in close relationship with people, their activities, political economies, and their infrastructures. Each elephant's personality, their set of unique behavioural patterns, evolves through its responses to situational experiences. The three biographies that we presented here are spatially located in the Western Ghats and temporally located in the Anthropocene. While going through the biographies by narrating key life events of the three elephants, we learned of how they adapt to drastic changes in their shared landscapes by changing their behaviours and strategies and constantly learning, constantly "becoming elephant". Conflict, captivity, violence, suffering, and trauma are part of their experiences.

To chart these elephant stories, we began by studying the popular narratives and media reports of human-elephant conflict, mainly provided in the form of stories of individual elephants. These elephants were portrayed as the cause of human suffering by organized farmer groups and as individuals who have suffered as a result of human intolerance and insensitive conflict management by the state by animal-rights activists. Both types of narratives were powerful enough to capture the attention of the public and researchers. Whereas the state and its conservation regime responded to the demands of the farmer groups, the legislature, supported by current Indian law, responded to the animal rights advocates. Our analysis found that neither of the narratives conformed to scientific and political realities, rather reflecting either the biases of land-rights defenders or animal rights supporters. People who live in proximity to elephants, and especially those who have lived experience with them, have helped us understand the deeper layered nature of human-elephant relations. People contextualize elephants. They know

that elephant lives, their bodies, traits, and personalities, are embedded in the political, social, and economic situations in which they live. We realized that separate worlds of elephants and humans do not exist; rather, humans and elephants co-create their worlds and their personalities within a shared space and history.

Despite the complaints, conflicts, violent encounters, and losses, we detected a strong sense of inter-species compassion in the people's feelings. Compassion for elephants and other more-than-human lives is part of people's everyday lives. Compassion as a feeling and an ideology has deep roots in Indian culture. The idea of compassion (*karuna* in Sanskrit) appears in early Buddhist literature as a wish for others and oneself to be free of suffering. Buddhist philosophy describes compassion as a natural and inborn feeling in all beings, whether human or nonhuman.[59] The ideal of *karuna* towards non-humans has been embraced by South Indian environmental activists, drawing on Mahathma Gandhi's notion of nonviolence (*ahimsa),* which is also rooted in Buddha's compassion (*karuna*).[60] B. R. Ambedkar, who used the term *karuna* in his struggle against social injustice,[61] brought the idea to the Indian constitution in order to expand the idea of democracy to all groups of people as well as other-than-humans. "Knowing" is the essential element in cultivating compassion. Interacting with people as we sought to learn the life stories of these three elephants, we encountered an active zone of mutual human-animal "knowing". This gave us hope and countered our tendency to see only increasing hatred and conflict between humans and animals, even when suffering and fear are the reality in the shared and co-created landscapes. Relationships between humans and elephants and the personalities of animals, are layered with the politics of conservation, with land and economic interests, and with survival strategies. The conceived binaries of "conservation priority" vs "problem individuals" and "victimised animals" are simplifications created by humans driven by particular concerns and interests.

59 Dar, "Concept of Compassion"; Maurya and DeDiego, "The Story of Compassion".

60 See Guha, *Environmentalism.*

61 Kumar, "Force and Adoration".

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