

# CALLING GANESHA

1st event of  
**Friends of Elephants**  
was held on  
Monday 7th April 2014  
at Bangalore

Friends of Elephants events  
will be held on a monthly basis

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## **Friends of Elephants**

### **Origin & Objectives**

The support we received while organizing the program 'Elephant Enigma' in January this year motivated us to start an informal group called FRIENDS OF ELEPHANTS. In our experience, there are small things (aka Lots of Gods of Small Things) that could be done to make a difference in conservation and welfare of the Asian Elephants. Conducting consistent educational or research programs on elephants, empowering forest watchers, help in providing educational support to their families, generating resource or man-power to help mahout's family to motivate them to treat the elephant with better care, adopt a child's education, conducting workshops on elephant welfare, awareness on hygiene maintenance, family care and saving of resources (income) are some of the conservation and welfare initiatives, that could be planned formally or informally.

If you wish to be a part of this informal group and share your time (even a small proportion); we could connect ourselves by regular updates, events on elephants conservation and welfare, share publications, photos, videos, news items of the species or we could even attempt to conduct a course on elephants (for various levels of people) which will take care of research, conservation and welfare.

### **Calling Ganesha - Calling Values**

"Calling Ganesha" was the first program that was conducted by Friends of Elephants on the 7th of April 2014 to capture the juxtaposition in our country between the reverence that is offered to the elephant as a God and the inhumane treatment that is meted out to them.



Glimpses of 7th April 2014 event





On the face of it, there seems to be a strong association between Lord Ganesha and the elephant. Even when the elephant is placed on a pedestal - in God's status - suffering of elephants kept in captivity is in stark contrast to the reverence associated with elephant as God. There is a lot of exploitation of elephants in captivity. One group of mahouts opined that human beings are superior and Lord Ganesha came as an elephant to serve humans. This approach turns the reverence belief on its head and places humans on a pedestal which in turn leads to exploitation. It is, thus, important to call Lord Ganesha to prevent this exploitation, to provide a scaffolding upon which elephants are not viewed as tools to serve humans.



*Audience at the event*

## Calling Ganesha

Hanuman Brotherpeter, an Australian, is a cultural anthropologist and a keen follower of the Vedic way of life; he started the program with the recital of bhajans dedicated to "Lord Ganesha"- the elephant God, interspersed his talk with his experiences and documented cases of the gentleness of these large mammals. As an animal trainer, he believes in the science of positive behavioral techniques to deal with elephants in captivity as opposed to negative practices that are still being carried out.

During his presentation, an important aspect that he highlighted was - if you keep elephants in captivity for longer duration, moving such elephants to more natural systems of keeping, imposes a lot of stress on them. Once elephants are shifted from captivity to more natural systems, their isolation from familiar surroundings and non-involvement in day-to-day natural activities will lead to increased mortality of the animals. Elephants cannot live in captivity under human control and still manage to sustain themselves in natural settings. Even though welfare is linked to providing natural settings in care centers in the form of food, water, shade, socializing opportunities etc., all such features should be introduced gradually to elephants exposed to unnatural environments.

## 18th Elephant

The musical presentation was followed by the screening of the documentary "18th Elephant - 3 Monologues", a film by P. Balan. The film is based on the Jataka Tales. In the story, an elephant owner has 17 elephants and three sons. The owner decides to divide the elephants among his sons. But the uneven number of elephants makes the distribution impossible in the proportion of half, one-third and one-ninth respectively - so they decide to kill an elephant. Just then a seer who passes by and hears about their decision advises them to adopt one more elephant to enable this distribution, instead of killing. This story indicates the ignorance of issues that can lead to wrong decision making. Had the seer not arrived, the family would have killed an innocent elephant. Problem solving can be achieved in various ways, but only knowledge and care can help in creating resourceful solutions instead of damaging the very issue that we want to protect.

The documentary "18th Elephant" showcased the cruel fate that follows the temple elephants, a symbol of divinity and status. Asian Elephants have had strong geographical & cultural association with human beings since time immemorial, which has in a sense contributed to its captivity. The documentary addressed the welfare and management status of elephants in captivity in the state of Kerala. The flow of events was depicted in the form of monologues to better understand the percept of elephants. Captive elephants in Kerala have contributed to the state's rich culture & heritage. The film focuses on the irony, & gives food for thought on whether this enrichment has been biased only towards the human perspective or has it really addressed the welfare of the animal.



*Elephant mud bath*

## Panel Discussion

Later a panel discussion was organised with the panelists P. Balan, Hanuman Brotherpeter and Surendra Varma; a mélange of individuals from different walks of life - but all associated with elephants in their own right. One of the concerns raised by an audience member pointed out whether culture, soaked in the religious sphere, really contravened the cruelty that goes behind making elephants perform in these festivities. It can be argued that any good religion should support the 'culture' of elephants, but nevertheless the issue of captivity has only left onlookers to contemplate the plight of elephants vis-a-vis religion/culture. Western zoos have largely depicted captivity of species in the most glorious sense; however, presentation of the invisible cruelty have been skewed or in a sense been omitted. Cruelty could be categorized as visible and invisible as per the act of defamation of a species, in this case an elephant being either physically or nutritionally abused.

The need to educate about visible and invisible cruelty and reach out to the younger generation, as well as the use of social media to champion the need for change amongst adults for the plight of the elephant was also addressed. It was felt that welfare could be achieved by education. Interestingly, Kerala has a population of 3 crores and only 450 people own elephants. If one looks at highlighting education as a tool to improve welfare - do we target 3 crores or just 450 people? It will be ideal if a consistent educational program is provided for 450 owners along with mass education program to ensure that the general audience enforces change in owners' attitudes towards their elephants.

In any attempt to educate the public, it must be kept in mind that their response can be impulsive, restricted to short duration, highly emotion based and with a negative feeling about owners. In the long run, this approach has no value. Consistent education for owners and sustained

It was also felt, that legal systems have been engulfed with a humongous task of protection and implementation of regimes that 'go well' for the elephant; but lack of knowledge, poor science and more emotions have considerably lead to the decline of the elephant systems in the country. Citizen science initiatives and people participation could refine regimes that could in a sense redefine this onslaught, followed by systematic approach to the cause. It can be safe to assume that things could change positively, as 'care and affection' is universal. One of the panelists also made the audience understand that self-respecting systems work well independently with constant mentoring, which could lead to a positive outgrowth for the status of elephants in captivity and this approach would go a long way in conserving the species holistically.

## Outcome

The significance and impact of this program was highlighted by many members of the audience wanting to participate in the movement of protecting the Asian Elephant in our country and the willingness to carry this cause forward through the "Friends of Elephant" group. Through the web of connectedness as individuals a mighty change can be made collectively.

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Panelists

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